There Will Be Light
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No Archive Warnings Apply

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Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Todd Anderson, Charlie Dalton, Knox Overstreet, Steven Meeks, Gerard Pitts, Richard Cameron, John Keating, Mr. Perry (Dead Poets Society), Mrs. Perry (Dead Poets Society), Ginny Danbury, Chris Noel

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There Will Be Light

by ConsiderableColors

Summary

"It's just his shoulder! Call an ambulance, he'll be alright, it's just his shoulder!"

As Neil was pulled into an embrace and voices he couldn't focus on drifted through his ears, he thought, Fuck. Fuck.

He missed.

Or, an AU where Neil survives his suicide attempt and his mental health is actually addressed.

Title taken from Light from Next to Normal.

Russian translation (done by Meridiem/Cosequatur): https://ficbook.net/readfic/9676303

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Author's Notes

Chapter Summary

Not an actual chapter, just some notes to preface.

Couple things I wanted to explain before we get into the actual story!

So, this fic is going to be the full, linear narrative of this series' version of Neil. Starting from the night of the play and his suicide attempt, following his recovery process.

All the stories I've already posted for Neil Perry Is Not Okay are going to be part of the story at some point. The first two drabbles in the series are actually the first chapter. They're going to be reworked to fit in the narrative, but for the most part will stay unchanged.

I'm still not sure if I'm going to delete the previously posted drabbles. Since they'll be included in this story, I don't really feel the need to leave them up, but I also know there's a couple bookmarks on these and I don't want to just delete them if people want them up still. If you have a preference, PLEASE let me know in the comments! Thx.

This is the full story, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the last in the series. I can definitely see myself doing more one-shots in the future. As long as you guys want more, I don't mind writing it!

Obviously, this story has the potential to be VERY triggering for some people, so please be careful reading this! I'll give general warnings in the tags, and chapter-specific warnings before each chapter. If I miss something, please tell me so I can fix it.

I'll warn now, this isn't going to be a super happy story. I want this to be realistic, not romanticizing, and follow Neil through everything, both ups and downs. However, I want to promise you all right upfront that no matter how bad things get, this story WILL have a happy ending. No one will die, no one will suffer eternally. This fic is about recovery. It will have a hopeful ending.

This is still a work in progress. There's not a set updating schedule, and updates might take a while because yknow... School, depression, etc. BUT, if I haven't updated for over a month, you have free permission to yell at me in the comments/on tumblr. I don't plan on abandoning this.

Each chapter title is going to be a lyric from a song. Want to listen to all the songs, in order? Then you should check out the playlist I made for it! (As well as my other playlists *wink wink*) Link is here: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0QDGhvYrEPfndrVDM93gfF?si=OPXKqEOCQ4mVmLb2BxBiIg

I think that's everything (finally) so with all that being said, I hope y'all enjoy! Thanks for reading!

Hold Your Breath While You Watch Me Fall

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: descriptions of suicidal thoughts & attempts, emotional abuse, self harm, internalized homophobia, and guns & shooting.

The first time Neil Perry said he wanted to die was in sixth grade. This was when all the kids in his classes started making jokes about how dumb they were or how sad their lives were. Eventually, Neil started saying all the same things because his friends were saying it, and it WAS a little funny. Soon self-deprecating jokes became the norm.

The first time Neil Perry actually wanted to die was in seventh grade. It was after he found out he had flunked his Algebra test, through a call with his father. His father had yelled and raved at him about how simple the test was, how he must not have tried hard enough, how this could ruin his grade point average. Suddenly, everything came crashing down, and Neil could feel the panic he had pushed down for years slowly floating to the surface and suffocating him.

That was the moment Neil really understood what it felt like to hate his life. All he could think about was how much easier things would be if everything stopped, and it terrified him. So, he grabbed one of the achievement pins off his dress shirt and pushed the point of the pin into his shoulder. It began to sink into his skin, and it hurt, but it distracted him from everything. He loved it. He slowly removed the pin, droplets of blood beginning to appear.

He started to realize what he had just done and panicked. His breathing became ragged and tears welled up in his eyes. Neil was still in that state when his best friend came in. The first thing Charlie Dalton did was dig a bandaid out of the first aid kit under his bed and put it on Neil's shoulder. The second thing he did was sit down beside Neil and ask him what happened.

Neil explained, shaking like a leaf in the breeze the whole time. About halfway through, Charlie wrapped his arms around him, gently rubbing his back. After Neil calmed down, Charlie made him promise to never, ever do something like that again, and to tell Charlie if he felt the urge to.

He broke his promise a month later, without crying or freaking out. In fact, he felt calmer than he had in weeks. So he kept doing it.

The first time Neil Perry thought about how he would kill himself was in eighth grade. It was the year Leo Sanders transferred to Hellton. Neil thought about him constantly. That month he did everything he could think of to act like all the other boys in his school. Still, whenever he saw Leo in Biology, a blush would crawl up his neck. When he finally accepted he liked guys, all he could think about was what his parents and friends would say. He thought about what the world would say. He thought about the drawer of his parent's nightstand and what it contained.

One night, Neil wrote out a suicide note, telling himself it was just in case. He wasn't going to do that. It was just in case he needed it.

The first time Neil Perry told his parents about how bad he was feeling was in ninth grade. That year he fluctuated between hopeless and numb. It was Charlie who noticed how different Neil seemed that year, and he was concerned enough to pull Neil aside and ask if he was okay.

Neil had grinned, saying, "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Charlie saw through him instantly and refused to relent. "Maybe you should talk to someone."

Neil's father was predictably dismissive, telling him he was being overdramatic and needed to man up a bit. His mother seemed worried, but as always she didn't contradict her husband. Neil decided not to try talking to an adult about his thoughts in the future.

The first time Neil Perry almost died was in tenth grade. By that point, he had advanced to using razor blades when he hurt himself. The big day had started off fine, but it just kept getting worse. By the time Neil finally got back to his room, he was ready to cut and go to bed. However, one or two slashes just wasn't enough like it usually was. So he kept doing it. The blade dug deeper and deeper the more he cut, and he didn't stop, despite feeling light-headed.

The next time Neil opened his eyes, be was in Charlie's room, on his bed, with Charlie silently crying next to him. A hoarse "Char?" was all it took for Charlie up snap out of it. Neil found himself pulled into the fiercest hug he had ever received. Soon, his best friend started talking, anger and fear battling to be the dominant emotion in his voice.

Charlie explained how he had knocked on Neil's door, worried he hadn't shown up for study group. Neil hadn't answered so he just walked in. More tears fell down his face as Charlie explained the

bloody mess he saw, with an unconscious Neil in the center of it. He continued that he had dragged Neil into the bathroom and cleaned his wounds (not before locking the door, obviously), bandaged him, and taken them to his room.

"What time is it?" Neil had asked hoarsely.

"3am."

"Oh."

Charlie had sighed. "How long has this been going on?"

"This was the first time."

"Don't lie to me, Neil."

Neil had looked away before speaking. "You remember in seventh grade, with the pin?"

"You... you promised you weren't going to do that again."

"I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean for it to become a habit."

"You could've died tonight! Do you realize that?!"

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, Neil, this isn't nothing!"

Neil's voice had filled with defeat. "Just leave me alone, okay?"

"Please, Neily, just talk to me."

"Stop, Charlie."

The first time Neil Perry tried to die, he was in eleventh grade, and it was the best year of his life. That was the year his friends broke out like never before. The year they got a new English teacher, who taught them to make the most out of every moment. The year Todd Anderson transfered to Welton, the year Neil fell in love with his roommate, and the year they snuck kisses under the moonlight. The year Neil played Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream. That was the

year he felt free.

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Of course, it didn't last.

Everything leading up to it had sounded right. When he got out of bed, it creaked. When he walked to the window, there were soft footsteps. When he opened the window, the rustling of wind. When he set his crown down, a soft bristling.

The clunks as Neil shuffled around his father's desk. The dull thump as he sat at his father's desk. A dejected sigh. A sharp intake of breath. And then? The click as he cocked the gun. His fingers pressed lightly against the trigger, feeling it, and started to press harder, when there was a thundering sound from the stairs. He flinched violently, hand slipping, when numbly, near detachedly, he heard the sound.

A bang, a pew, a crack, whatever. A shot. Then there was the huffs and puffs, hyperventilating. Everything felt like it had frozen. Everything felt like too much. He couldn't breathe, but he was. He was breathing. He was crying. Soon it was joined by more cries, even screams, but those ones weren't his, were they? No. His parents. Why were they...?

Then, a horrible sound. His mother sobbing when his father's voice piped up, dripping relief, but for Neil it was the sound of hopelessness.

"It's just his shoulder! Call an ambulance, he'll be alright, it's just his shoulder!"

As he was pulled into an embrace and voices he couldn't focus on drifted through his ears, he thought, Fuck. Fuck.

He missed.
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Is This How I Die?

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: hospitalization, suicidal thoughts & aftermath of a suicide attempt, fighting (verbal) & general anger, and crying.

The first time Neil wakes up, he's just concious enough to register a nurse checking some sort of tube before he falls back under.

The second time, he swears he feels a rough hand on his. He can't tell who it is, because his eyes don't make it open. He passes right back out.

The third time, his mind feels considerably less fuzzy. He can actually form thoughts in his head without feeling like being pushed head-first into quicksand. He opens one eye slowly and immediately closes it. Bright. Way too fucking bright.

"Neil?"

He thinks it's Meeks that noticed, which fits well enough. The minute he hears it, his mind starts switching into overdrive, a million thoughts popping into his head at once. The first is the acknowledgment that he's in the hospital, which gets him confused for only a split second, before he remembers everything. His thoughts practically triple in franticness. There's a part of him on the verge of tears, furious at himself for failing, already planning where to get a new weapon the minute they let him check out. Another part of him is relieved.

However, the thought that takes top priority is that Meeks said something, which means Meeks is here, which means there's a good chance all his friends are here, which means there's a good chance all his friends know he tried to off himself. Fuck. Fuck.

He focused on making sure his eyes are closed all the way and tries to even his breathing. Maybe they'll think he's still asleep.

A hand is placed on his, and he barely keeps himself from jumping at the contact.

"Neil."

That one's Charlie. That one's a very, very upset Charlie. Neil can't tell

if he's angry, tired, worried, or something else, but whatever emotion it is, it makes Neil feel incredibly, unbearably guilty. He's not going to open his eyes. He's not going to respond. Right now, he's asleep. He's asleep, and he doesn't have to talk, doesn't have to deal with telling his friends (or his parents, oh God) what the hell happened.
He's not dealing with it. He is not doing this.

It's quiet for at least a couple of minutes. Neil is staying as still as possible, which is fucking impossible, because Neil Perry is constantly moving. Always has been. (Almost wasn't, his mind supplies.) Did they leave? Did they walk out, and he just didn't notice?

He opens his eyes a tiny bit, sees that shit, they are definitely still there, and clenches them back shut. It's not going to do any good, he knows it. Everyone's there. Everyone saw him.

He feels the edge of the bed sink as someone sits on it. "Hey." Knox is speaking in a quiet voice, like he's afraid if he talks any louder Neil will crack. He can't stand it. It makes his stomach twist. He's not FRAGILE.

"Hey yourself," He eventually says. He sounds like shit.

"The nurse brought food, if you're hungry."

"Hospital food's shit."

"Can't be worse than Hellton Hash."

Neil snorts in his mind, but he can't even make himself smile. Why is Knox making small talk?

"And there's milk. It's probably expired, but..."

He opens his eyes fully and looks up at Knox. He's smiling hesitantly, and Neil could almost believe it's sincere, if it weren't for the fact that Knox so obviously cried his eyes out at some point. Neil's eyes dart down quickly. "I'm not really, you know. Hungry. But thanks."

"The doctor said you're supposed to try and eat something," Cameron says.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can guess what the doctor said, Cameron," Neil snaps. "Supposed to become one, remember?"

Cameron blinks, and Neil really wants to apologize, but all of the

sudden he's mad. He's so mad.

"Don't be an ass," Charlie says, and Neil doesn't even try to hide his scoff.

"Oh, you're one to talk."

Knox shifts. "Guys. Can we not?"

Neil rounds on him. "What do you want to do, talk about the weather? Yeah, it's a lovely day, nice and sunny. Or maybe we're in the middle of a fucking earthquake. Beats me, because I don't know if you noticed, but I'm not outside."

Charlie's hands ball into fists. "What the hell were you thinking, Neil?"

He scoffs.

"No. I want to know what was so FUCKING awful that you thought you could just- just-"

"What?! What, Charlie?!"

He shakes his head. "I'm leaving. Call me when he's not acting like a prick."

"Charlie-"

He doesn't even hear Pitts, already out the door.

It's quiet a moment, no one knowing what to say. Neil starts to sit up, but a burning pain explodes from his shoulder, and he winces.

"Neil, you shouldn't-"

There's a hand against his back.

"Your shoulder's-"

Neil pulls away, biting down a grunt. "I'm fucking fine! I've got it!"

They all pull away, looking at him. He's never felt angrier in his life. He wasn't supposed to be dealing with this shit. He was supposed to be DONE, dammit.

He was supposed to be gone.

"Screw it. I'm going back to bed."

"Neil, you should eat."

He doesn't even look up, leaning back against the pillow. He closes his eyes and waits until he hears footsteps fading. One, two, three, four sets. Charlie already left. Todd wasn't there.

It's only after he's sure everyone's gone that he buries himself deeper into the pillow, tears silently streaming off his face. He's screwed up. Badly.

Everything feels wrong.

At some point, the door opens. He doesn't move. He assumes it's just a doctor checking vitals, maybe someone coming to get the now cold food, until he feels a hand lightly rubbing his back.

"Neil?"

He lets out a small sob. "Mom."

There are arms wrapping around him, careful to avoid all the tubes and wires, and the large bandage covering his shoulder.

He leans against her, crying quietly.

"Oh.."

For once, he's grateful his mother doesn't talk much. He can't stand anymore talking right now. He just needs someone to sit with him. That's the one thing she's always been able to do.

"I'm sorry," He mumbles.

"Shh. None of that right now. You just..." She trails off, holding him tighter.

"It's okay. You'll be okay now."

He doesn't have the heart to tell her he doesn't believe her.

Eventually, he manages to fall asleep.

When he wakes back up, he's alone again.

And You'll Begin To Wonder Why You Came

Chapter Notes

> Merry Christmas to those who celebrate and happy Wednesday otherwise! Have a good day and enjoy the angst 💕💕
>
> Warnings: aftermath of a suicide attempt, hospitalization, referenced emotional abuse, referenced guns, referenced self harm, and crying.

It's at least a few hours before the boys file back in. Charlie's at the head, still looking rather pissed, followed by Meeks, then Pitts, then Knox, all walking on eggshells. Cameron's at the back, looking to Neil like he's extremely uncomfortable, but he's nothing compared to Todd, who trails in a few moments later.

He's staring down at the ground, face entirely unreadable. It's scary, because Neil never, ever has a problem understanding what Todd's thinking. But right now, it's like the first few days they roomed with each other. He's a stranger. Looking back at the others, he realizes they all are.

If there's one thing Neil can say for himself, it's that he's a people person. He lives to help, to listen, to entertain. To cheer up and elicit excitement. Maybe it's from the years of trying to predict when his father will be in a bad mood, but he's used to reading people. Now, though? His golden-boy mask is gone, and he has no clue what his friends are thinking.

Charlie makes eye contact with him, eyes sharp and pained, and Neil becomes very concious is the fact that he still looks like he's been crying like a temperamental child. Neil looks away.

"I'm sorry I snapped." He says softly. "I just..." He doesn't want to make excuses. He acted like a prick and he knows it. "I'm sorry."

Charlie nods.

"That goes for you guys too." Neil casts a look towards the others.

"It's okay, Neil," Meeks says. It's really not. "Are you feeling any better?"

Neil has to hold back a laugh. "Yeah. Loads." It comes out a lot more

sarcastic than he intended, but oh well. Not like they'll believe him anyway.

Meeks doesn't seem particularly inclined to argue, so he settles for a "That's good," and leaves it at that.

Todd still hasn't looked up, Neil's mind points out. It's one of his core instincts, to make sure no one's being left out or ignored, and no one activates the instinct more than Todd. Neil's mouth starts to form his name, but instead thinks better of it, snapping shut. If the other's noticed, they don't say anything.

"Alright everyone, you'll have to come back in a few minutes." A nurse comes in, moving towards Neil's bed. "I need to check a few things. One or two of you can stay if you keep back, alright?"

Pitts shakes his head. "No, it's okay. Thank you though. Guys?"

Charlie squeezes Neil's hand gently, and Neil swears he sees his eyes watering right before he turns away. What a punch to the gut.

He counts the pairs of footsteps leaving, but there's one missing. He looks up and sees Todd in the doorway, still facing away. He doesn't make any effort to move.

"Have you eaten anything yet?" The nurse asks. Neil shakes his head, and the nurse frowns, his face full of disapproval. "We need to make sure you can keep food down, okay? Even if it's just something small."

"Right. Sorry."

He continues fiddling with a few of the tubes and checks the monitors a few times. "Alright. Make sure you press the button if you need something, alright?"

Neil nods, and the nurse smiles smally before leaving. His eyes follow him out the door. Todd's still there.

Todd's still there.

"I think your parents lied to us." His voice is steady and even. Neil can tell he's practiced this a million times, and his heart aches because Todd doesn't have to do that with him, with any of them. He's comfortable with the group. He's comfortable with HIM. He was, at least.

"They told us you were looking for something, in one of the drawers, and you hit the... the gun by accident. And the safety wasn't on so it just- it just shot."

Of course. Of course his parents would say that. He wonders if that's what the doctors have been told, too. It wouldn't surprise him. Can't let it get out that Neil Perry tried to kill himself.

"But that's not true, is it?"

Finally, Todd looks up, and immediately, Neil wishes he would've just kept his head down. Todd doesn't look sad, or scared, or patronizing, or confused, or even angry. He looks betrayed. Neil shakes his head wordlessly.

"We didn't think so."

Neil speaks up, throat dry. "You guys knew?"

"You're not as subtle as you think you are." Todd's hands squeeze into fists. "I'm your roommate, Neil. Your roommate. Do you honestly think I don't see the scars? The way you tense up and hide things when I walk into the room? How long it takes you to make yourself get up in the morning, if you even need to wake up, because you don't SLEEP, Neil, I know you don't." His voice catches, full of pain. "Do you honestly take me for that much of an idiot?"

Neil can't find it in himself to respond.

"But I thought- we thought- it couldn't be too serious, because we're your FRIENDS, and you TRUST us, and you would- you'd tell us if something was wrong!"

"You... You all talked about me?"

"Yes! We were worried, Neil, we were scared to death! But we- we thought, maybe we're just reading into it too much, maybe we're making it into a big deal, but..." He runs a hand through his hair, shaking.

"Then we get told you're in the hospital, and you've been shot, and- and we know you're not that dumb, you didn't accidentally set off a gun, and that- God- that look on your face when you left the theatre, you looked so hopeless, and... and..."

He trails off, eyes squeezing shut, and Neil can't think of a single thing

to say. Todd speaks for him, sounding absolutely devastated.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Neil sighs.

"Neil."

"I... I don't..." What the hell can he say? What the hell is there to say to this, to any of this?

Todd looks down, arms wrapping around himself. "Right. Yeah."

Neil tenses, every part of him screaming to say something, anything, to call the rest of the guys in and tell all of them he's so sorry, to tell them everything that's happened, to finally tell someone that something is seriously wrong, but he CAN'T. He just, he's trying, and he... He can't.

"I should go. You need to eat something."

"Todd, wait."

He looks back at him. Neil opens his mouth and closes it.

"I'll see you later, okay?" Todd turns back to the doorway. "I hope you feel better."

He leaves, and Neil doesn't do a single thing to stop him.

I'll Do My Best, What Else Can I Do?

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: hospitalization, hinted emotional abuse, and the aftermath of a suicide attempt, which I'm going to stop tagging at this point since that's going to apply to the entire story

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil becomes accustomed to recognizing who's entered his room on the sound of their walking alone. Everyone has something that gives them away. His mother's are the softest. The nurse with long, black hair has a badge that jingles a bit, but the nurse with the pixie cut wears more on her lanyard, so it sounds even louder. Charlie's skid across the floor. Pitts' stomp. Cameron's are perfectly even.

It's not too hard once you get used to it. If unfamiliar ones show up, he learns and adapts. In just a small amount of days, he's memorized an estimated 20 people. It's worth it. He doesn't even need to make eye contact. Doesn't have to know what emotion they're looking at him with. Then, one day, he hears a different set.

They haven't shown up in his room yet, but they're most definitely not new. He could recognize them from anywhere.

"Neil."

He swallows, steadying himself. "Father."

He sits down on the edge of the bed, eyebrows furrowed. "How are you feeling?"

"Alright."

He nods.

Neil badly wants to ask why it took him so long to show up, but a part of him thinks he doesn't want to know. He doubts he'd like the answer.

"Look, we need to discuss what happened last Friday."

"Okay," He says reluctantly.

"Was the... Incident... All because of this military school?"

Neil's eyes widen. This is his chance, isn't it? He can dismiss this whole thing, brush it off as an overdramatic reaction. He hesitates. "Yes."

Mr. Perry's eyes bear into him. He doesn't believe it, Neil realizes. His father takes a moment, before nodding curtly.

He doesn't believe it, but he wants to. Apparently, that's enough.

"Well, we clearly need to have a talk about your complete lack of judgment. If you're so defiantly against something, you tell me. I don't know what the hell you thought you'd accomplish."

Neil's chest tightens, and he has to stop himself from crying, because he TRIED to, he tried to make him understand, but his father never listens, and now he's getting chewed out for not knowing what else to do?

"This was an irrational, impulsive reaction. I expect you to have more sense than that. Do you understand?"

He fights to keep his voice from breaking. "Yes, sir."

"Good." He looks at him a minute, look softening for a moment before it hardens. "I believe I'm correct in thinking you've learned your lesson from all this acting business?" He waits for Neil to nod before continuing. "Well then, I don't have a problem with you returning to Welton. I've instructed the staff to keep a closer eye on you, to make sure you aren't joining any kind of club or extracurricular, since you clearly can't handle those."

"But-"

Mr. Perry continues as if he hasn't heard him. "The threat of military school still stands, and you'd do well to remember that, but for now I believe this is a fair compromise. I'll let you finish out your education here, and we won't have to worry about anymore..." He pauses. "Drastic actions."

Neil nods, reading him loud and clear. He gets to stay at Welton so he doesn't kill himself. Of course, that would be the only thing to make his father change his mind. There's a part of Neil that wonders bitterly if Mr. Perry actually gives a damn about him dying, or if he just doesn't want to waste money on a coffin.

"The doctors say you're healing fine, expected to make a full recovery. You're very lucky." He doesn't feel lucky at all. "You should be getting out in a few more days. You'll have to work hard to catch up, of course, but Mr. Nolan assures me that your teachers are willing to work with you."

Neil nods again.

"You'll have a lot to catch up on in English particularly, because I'm switching you out of Keating's class."

"What?"

"No, Neil. I don't want hear it. You think I want to? You'll be a year behind, but it's clear you can't stay in the junior classroom."

"Father, it wasn't Mr. Keating's fault! The whole thing was my idea."

Mr. Perry scoffs. "I don't believe it. He's lucky I don't sue."

"Please. Like you said, I'll be pushed back in my studies too! Harvard only accepts the best of the best."

"Then you'll have to work hard, won't you?"

Neil deflates, looking down.

"Once you're back at school, I expect a weekly call with updates on how everything is going. Alright?"

He nods, barely even listening.

"This was a very dangerous situation, Neil. I won't risk losing you again."

Neil knows that he struggles raising him, struggles with expressing his emotions. He knows that coming from his father, that's basically an "I love you". It doesn't make it hurt any less.

This 'little stunt' of his hasn't changed anything, in the grand scheme of things. Everything's just gotten worse. He's out of the play, out of his favorite class, and on an even tighter leash than before.

He's trapped.

The rest of his stay in the hospital is the quietest he's ever been. His answers to the nurses, doctors, even his friends become no more than

nodding or shaking his head. Sometimes, he'll throw in a shrug, just to spice things up.

Meeks has taken to mothering him, always trying to get him to eat or sleep, not that he needs to. They're the only things he can do in the hospital anyway. Pitts is always trying to make him laugh, or at least crack a smile. Neil forces them out, with varying results. Knox just sits with him, looking like a puppy waiting for its family to get home from work or school.

Cameron usually just hovers, until one Tuesday he comes alone. He's snuck in a small popcorn chicken from KFC. "The food you've been eating looks like actual horse shit," he says bluntly. Neil takes a bite. It's greasy, ice-cold, and the best food he's had in what feels like ages. He's promised more next visit, and Neil thinks the group really is too hard on Cameron sometimes.

Charlie and Todd don't come too often, but when they do, it's about the same as their first hospital interactions. By the time whoever's there has left, Neil's usually either fuming or crying. He can tell it's the same for them too. They're some of his favorite people in the world, but he starts dreading their visits. The only saving grace is that usually a nurse will kick the person out once voices are raised.

His mother visits the most, usually just to hug him, apologize, and cry. He thinks her visits make him feel the guiltiest. They're also the only times Neil actually feels grateful he didn't die. He thinks his mother wouldn't have been able to handle it.

His father doesn't come again. Neil's sure this is hard for him. Well, he thinks angrily, it's hard for him too.

About a week later, he's released. He has some physical therapy scheduled, a few excercises to do at home, and of course, the "drink lots of water and rest and don't over-exert yourself" spiel.

Walking into Welton, he thinks he took the hospital for granted.

Chapter End Notes

Neil's out of the hospital and back to school! Oh, dear...

Also, I'm still figuring out what role I want Cameron to play in the story, so hopefully my writing of him doesn't sound too awkward lmao.

Pulled Against The Grain I Feel A Little Pain

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: self harm, lying, touch starvation, and a quick gun mention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The minute they get to Neil's room, Charlie turns to him. "Razors. Now."

Neil lets out a sigh.

"All of them."

He begins stripping the room, more and more being pulled out by the second. Neil watches their eyes grow wide as his hiding locations become more and more absurd. They're at the top of the closet, between the cushions of the desk chair, under Todd's bed.

"Jesus. Is there one up your ass too?"

"Ha ha."

Pulling one from his bed frame and placing it in the pile, Neil looks at them expectedly. Charlie takes them and begins placing them into a bag. Each one is wrapped in some form of paper towel or tissue.

Charlie's eyes meet Neil's, eyebrows furrowed. "Is this all of them?"

"Yes," Neil says forcefully. Of course not. He still has the sock drawer, under the rug, and the paper towel dispenser in the third floor bathroom: his magnum opus. "You realize I could just buy more, right?"

"I'm keeping your money," Charlie says flatly. "You're on lockdown, Perry. You don't go to the vending machine without one of us present."

Neil flashes him a grin, looking more like a grimace. "Lovely."

"Meeks?" Knox asks. "Do you have the..."

Meeks pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and hands it to Neil. He looks down as Neil begins to read.

6:30 AM- Wake Up- Todd
6:45 AM- Get Dressed- Todd
7:00 AM- Breakfast- Everyone
8:00 AM- School- Everyone
3:20 PM- Chill Time- Anyone
5:00 PM- Dinner- Everyone
6:00 PM- Study Group- Everyone
7:00 PM- Shower- Charlie or Todd
7:20 PM- Chill Time- Charlie or Todd
10:00 PM- Sleep

When he reaches the end of the page, Neil sputters. "What is this?"

"Your schedule." Cameron says simply.

"My- my what?"

Knox looks down. "Like Charlie said... you're on lockdown."

"So that means I get fucking babysat? I'm not a child."

No one dignifies him with a response. "Wait..." Neil lifts the paper, scanning over it again. "What about meetings?"

"Meetings?"

"The club, Pitts."

Everyone in the group exchanges a look, and Neil feels his heart drop. "What? It's not on here."

Meeks steps forward slowly. "We know."

Neil looks at him a minute, before the expression in his face hardens. "No. No way. Absolutely not."

"It's not a permanent thing."

His eyes flash. "Fuck off."

"Just until things settle down."

"Fuck OFF, Meeks."

Meeks' face falls. "It's just not a good idea right now. We should be laying low anyway. We don't need to be caught."

"And why does being caught matter all of a sudden? It wasn't a risk BEFORE."

"Things were different before, Neil."

His face crumbles. "So that's it? The Dead Poets Society is done?"

Cameron scowls. "You don't need to be dramatic."

"Just for a bit," Meeks repeats, voice even.

Neil chuckles bitterly. "You know, I'm kind of in the mood to angrily storm out right now, so who's gonna follow me?"

The boys look around blankly.

"Go ahead, make a decision. No one's volunteering as tribute? Or did your little schedule not account for Neily having opinions?"

Knox steps forward, hands up and eyes soft. "Neil, just calm down..."

He flushes darkly. "No, go on! Someone has to follow me to make sure I don't SPONTANEOUSLY CONJURE a gun! I might fucking OFF myself if you don't!" Hot tears spring from his eyes, voice wavering.

"I just want to act like things are normal! That's all I want!" His voice fills with desperation. "Is that so much to ask?"

"Things aren't normal, Neil," Knox says plainly.

Meeks nods. "Not anymore."

Knox reaches out to put his arms around him, and Neil jerks away. Knox draws back, eyes wide and sad.

Neil can still feel the ghost of touch on him, and he numbly realizes that was the first time someone besides his mother has hugged him since the night of the play. He already misses it.

"I just need a minute." He sits down on the edge of his bed. It doesn't feel like home anymore. Nothing does.

After a moment of silence, Pitts speaks. "Hey, you should rest. We'll see you later, okay?"

"Study group?" Cameron offers.

"Yeah."

Charlie shoots Todd a questioning look, to which he mouths, "I've got him". Charlie nods and leaves, the rest of the group trailing behind him.

Todd sits at the desk. "I have homework. Get my attention if you need me?"

"Yeah."

"Do you need anything?"

Neil looks at him blankly a minute, before piping up, "Are my earbuds here somewhere?"

Todd digs them out of the desk drawer and tosses them to him. He opens up a book and starts to read.

Neil looks down at the earbuds in his hand and pulls out his phone, opening a playlist. The buds slip in, and he closes his eyes, just losing himself to the music for a minute.

"With your feet on the air and your head on the ground..."

He runs a hand through his hair, gripping tightly at his bangs and pulling. It stings. Not as much as other things, but it helps. He opens his eyes and looks down to discover he's pulled out a few strands. He pulls harder.

The plan was to try again. To get back to school, ease worries, and once everyone's asleep, end it once and for all. Now, there's no way that's happening. He's being treated like a toddler.

Who knows when he's going to be by himself again? Forget another attempt, he's not even going to be able to cut. And there's no more DPS meetings, and no more actually-engaging-classes with Keating, and no more acting, obviously.

Not to mention he's completely broken the trust of all his friends. And if Todd and Charlie are anything to go off of, they're all pissed too. He's royally fucked up everything.

He unconsciously brings his hand up to his bandaged shoulder. A sharp pain immediately shoots through him and he lets out a gasp. He moves his hand just as Todd whips around.

"Are you okay?"

He bites his cheek. "Yeah. Fine."

Todd hesitantly turns back to his work, and Neil falls back onto the bed, closing his eyes again and willing the music to drown out his thoughts. To let him believe he's somewhere else, even if it's only for a few minutes.

"Your head will collapse, but there's nothing in it, and you'll ask yourself: where is my mind? Where is my mind, where is my mind?"

Chapter End Notes

Look, I don't do lyrics in the middle of chapters often, but Neil wanted to groove and I thought I'd let him?

Also I know we're moving a bit slowly here, but I really don't want to rush through any of this, and I want to sort of establish things like how Neil's life is going to be at Welton after what's happened.

Soon, we're going to be focusing a bit more on stuff like rebuilding trust between the characters. There's a few chapters in the near future I'm rlly exited for (like a flashback chapter 👀) so hopefully y'all are excited too!

Anywho thx for your patience (both in terms of plot & updates), and t h a n k y o u to everyone who's left comments & asks bc it makes my day 💕💕 See you next chapter !

To Live A Life Where Nothing's As It Seems

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: referenced eating disorders, self harm, and trichotillomania & dermatillomania (or hair pulling & skin picking).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a way, Neil falls back into the same routine. In most ways, however, he's tired.

He's tired of having someone check what he has before he enters the shower, standing outside the door, and pounding on the door if he's in the shower for "too long", which can be anywhere from two minutes to twenty minutes depending on the day.

He's also tired of "chill time", as his schedule has dubbed it. Under different circumstances, he'd have zero problems spending a couple hours with Todd or Charlie. It'd be fun. Instead, it's painfully awkward and PAINFULLY annoying. He'd given up on actually trying to hang out with them after the first few days, since it was clearly a lost cause, but as it turns out, the alternative isn't much better.

If he's on his phone, it's "what music are you listening to, you shouldn't be looking at that article, I don't think that's a good idea". He's been "banned" from listening to any sad playlists, which is absolute bullshit, but not as bad as reading. If he tries to take out a book, it's "what are you reading, what's that book about, I don't think you should be reading something like that right now".

He tried to pull out Keating's poetry book once and practically got a look of horror. Reading Midsummer went just about as awful. Eventually, he learns to take off random book jackets and put them over what he's actually reading. It works like a charm, convincing his friends that he's been reading Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix for weeks now. Instead, he starts reading Hamlet. It's very good, the right balance of sadly relatable and easy to laugh at. He still prefers the comedies, however.

No matter what he does, in or outside of class, everyone is still constantly staring at him. He has to talk his own ear off and point like crazy around the hall just to distract everyone enough from him and

get rid of his food during meals. That's a whole can of worms he does NOT want opened.

As hard as he tries to pretend things are normal (so that everyone else will act like things are normal), there's one thing above everything else that is driving him crazy: every inch of his skin is crawling constantly with the urge to hurt himself.

He really and truly doesn't know how it got this far. He knows that ever since he was little, he's been known to pick and pull at his skin, hair, and whatever else. His father used to scold him constantly for it. "Stop picking at your eyebrows." "You're going to scratch your skin open." "For God's sake, Neil, if you can't keep your hands away, sit on them."

At some point, his mother started renting out a lot of library books that used big words like "trichotillomania" and "dermatillomania", but an eye roll from her husband shot that down pretty quickly. Once he hit puberty, everything got worse, though at least picking at pimples seemed to be something all his friends did.

Once he discovered razor blades, pencil sharpeners, and cutting, it was hard to keep control, but he swore he would. "It's just when I'm feeling really bad, it's just when I'm needing it". What he hadn't calculated, however, was that as his feelings grew worse and worse, "when I'm needing it" became practically once a day, if not more.

Now, he's arguably feeling worse than ever, and pulling at arm hairs is not even close to enough. So, the next day, during library "chill time" with Todd, Neil conveniently forgets his textbook in their dorm.

"It'll only be a second, I'll be right back," he smiles widely, dashing off before Todd can say a word of protest.

Now, look: Neil's pretty sure this isn't what Mr. Keating meant by 'Carpe Diem'. Still, that's what ends up running through his mind as he yanks open the top drawer of his dresser. The only problem is 'Carpe Diem' sounds a bit too fancy for this particular moment.

Seizing the day should be reserved for daring displays of passions; Todd and his poetry, Charlie and his music, Knox and his sketches, Meeks and his mechanics, Pitts and his knitting, whatever Cameron does. Any of them could do the phrase justice. Hell, if Neil were about to try out for another play, he could use that term. However, Neil's current art form is less deserving. 'Screw it' would be a more accurate thought.

Hastily, he finds himself digging through his clothing, lifting pile after pile out of the drawer. He only grows more frantic as there continues to be a lack of what he's looking for.

"Where the hell is it?" He mutters, running a hand through his hair. Looking down, there's only one shirt left in the drawer. He takes it out, revealing a small note written in instantly recognizable handwriting: 'Nice try.' Clenching the note in his fist, Neil slams the drawer shut and storms out of the room.

When he raps on the door, Neil's met with a smirking face. Charlie's smile quickly disappears when he sees Neil. "What's wrong?"

"I know you took them," Neil snaps without thinking. So much for telling everyone he gave them all away. "And you had no right to. I want them back."

Charlie looks at him, face concerned but vaguely confused. Neil grits his teeth together. "I saw the note in my dresser. I know it was you."

Realization dawns on Charlie's face and he shakes his head immediately.

"Give them back."

"You know I'm not doing that, Neil."

He huffs. "Look, I am beyond done with everything right now, so can you please just fuck off? It's none of your business."

"I'm your best friend. That makes it my business."

"Please, Charlie." He sees Charlie wince at the pleading tone and continues. "I need it."

Neil's hopes are dashed the minute Charlie hardens his face. "No. No, you don't."

"You can't just-"

"I can, I did, and I am."

"Just one more time," Neil promises, getting desperate. "I swear, and then I'm done. I'll stop."

Charlie sighs. "That's what you said last time. You know I can't give you back your stuff, Neil."

"Fine. Then give me my money."

"Like hell."

"Charlie."

"I said, like hell."

"I need to. Please, Charlie, I have to, alright? I have to-" Neil is cut off by Charlie placing a hand on his shoulder, which he quickly shoves away.

"Neil, it's gonna be okay. But you have to stick to this." Neil's scowl deepens as Charlie talks. "C'mon. We can watch one of those musicals you like, okay?" When Neil doesn't reply, Charlie places a hand on his shoulder.

Neil's eyes flicker up to meet his. "...Okay."

Charlie hands him his laptop. "Pick whatever you want, yeah? I just need to text Todd you're with me."

Neil's grip on the laptop tightens, but he forces himself to breathe and begins typing. They end up watching some low-quality bootleg of A Chorus Line. Silently, Charlie wonders why they arent watching the official movie adaptation, but elects not to say anything.

About halfway through, Neil appears to fall asleep. Charlie pushes a few stray hairs out of his face, and Neil does his best attempt to stay frozen still. Eyes closed, he hears Charlie turn the video off and stand. He feels himself being picked up and tucked into a bed, then a dip as Charlie lays down about a foot away from him, realizing Neil needs space at the moment.

Even from elementary school, Charlie and Neil were always a fan of sleepovers. Their first ever, at Neil's house, sparked an argument. Neil insisted his guest would not sleep on the floor, even if it was in a sleeping bag. Charlie, in turn, refused to steal Neil's own bed. They ended up sharing, because it only made sense, and they never really stopped. A part of Neil wants to stay exactly where he is, if only because the feeling is so familiar.

Instead, he waits until he's certain Charlie is asleep. He moves a bit, and stops to check. Moves a bit more, checks. Finally, he's out of the bed. He looks back at Charlie, trying to press down the guilt consuming him.

He sifts through Charlie's things.

He pulls out about twenty dollars and pockets it. He's confident Charlie isn't checking. He pulls out his small, black bag. Opens it. Removes a pocket knife, a tissue, and a bandaid. He cuts. Cleans it up. Puts everything back. Gets back in bed, covers pulled up again.

Practically seconds later, he hears Cameron come in and take the bed opposite. Silently, he thanks whatever God may be out there that he timed everything right. His heart pounds, caught between the adrenaline of getting away with that and the shame that he snuck around his best friend, basically his brother.

He doesn't fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

In which I revisit one of the older fics and change the ending!

Sorry this one had a bit of a wait, my week was v busy. Next chapter (which I'm a l m o s t done editing) is uh... Very long. But I'm very excited for it, so hopefully y'all are too!

You Promised Me You'd Be Around

Chapter Notes

> In which a chapter that is three (3) times the normal length gives us a bit more insight into Charlie and Neil's friendship.
>
> PLEASE read the warnings carefully, and make sure you're in an ok-place mentally before reading, this chapter deals with intense stuff.
>
> Warnings for: physical child abuse, minor character death, successful suicide attempt, and Neil's suicide attempt, as well as emotional abuse, non-graphic descriptions of violence, some enforced gender roles-type language, self-harm, smoking, and a quick innuendo.
>
> The child abuse, violence, and suicide all start and end within the section with ~~~****~~~ if you need to skip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie is 5 years old when he meets his best friend for life. It's the very first day of Kindergarten, and he's running through the room, imagining that he's a bolt of thunder striking the sky, when he bumps into a table and very loudly exclaims, "Ow!"

A boy with messy, brown bangs that look like lightning pops his head down to look. "Are you okay?"

Charlie hushes him quickly. "I gotta hide before he counts to three!"

The boy looks at him a minute before moving his backpack and ushering him under the table. Charlie smiles wide at him before slipping under. He's the very last one found, a fact he's quite proud of.

Once the game's done, Charlie invites himself to sit next to the boy, leaning over his shoulder. He's coloring, a deep green crayon with barely any left in his hand.

"You sure like green, huh?"

"It's my favorite color! Like my sweater, see?" The boy pulls at his turtleneck, smiling. "What's yours?"

"I like red! That's my big brother James' favorite too."

The boy's eyes go wide. "You have a brother?"

"Uh huh, and a sister. But she's just two months so she can't do much."

"I wish I had siblings."

"Nah, they're annoying." He grins, before pausing and shaking his head. "But I like 'em."

Charlie gets a nod in return, watching as an untouched red crayon gets picked up. "I'll make this part red since you like it."

"Woah. Thanks." He gasps before sticking his hand out. "Oh! I'm Charlie!"

"I'm Neil." Neil shakes his hand quickly, laughing at how wobbly it is.

Charlie hears him laugh and decides that he wants Neil to be his brother too.

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"Oh, Neil, careful."

"Sorry, Mama!" Neil's hand is gripping Charlie's tightly, dragging him through the house. Charlie keeps up, giggling the whole way.

"Okay, now the pirates are leaving when the dragon comes, and- oh, can you be the dragon for a second?"

"Mhm." Charlie puffs out his chest, doing his best growly voice. "You have entered the dragon lands! For that, you must be... Punished." His voice normalizes. "The pirates scream in horror!"

"But the captain draws her sword from her belt, faces the dragon, and-"

"Wait, the captain pirate's a girl?"

"Yeah. Whenever Mama's book club reads Treasure Island, they always says that there should be girl pirates in it too. Right, Mama?"

Mrs. Perry looks up from her book and smiles lightly. "Absolutely. But you don't need to play the captain as a girl, sweetheart. That's just silly."
~~~

Neil tilts his head. "Why not?"

"Well, you aren't a girl, are you?"

"I'll play the captain," Charlie pipes up. "I don't mind."

Mrs. Perry looks hesitant, but nods, and the two run off the minute they see it.

"Reach a stopping point, Neil! Your father will be home soon and we'll sit down for supper."

"Ok!"

When Mr. Perry comes in, the two are sitting in the living room, waving (capped) markers at each other frantically.

"You coward!" Charlie bellows. "Face me without your silly magics!"

"Nay, I won't!" Neil points. "The witch casts a spell and it hits the captain right in the eyes!"

"Aaaah!" Charlie begins to fall, brushing his marker against Neil's side as he does. "You can't get away with this!"

"Your sword! It's stabbed me! Well, how about this? Healing spell!"

"Cheater!"

"Neil!" Mr. Perry yells. Both boys snap up, markers dropping. "Keep the volume down! I've got a migraine."

"Sorry, Dad..."

"What are you playing anyway?"

Neil's smile builds again. "Well, Charlie's the pirate captain, she leads the S.S. Discovery, but they went into the dragon lands and now the witch- that's me- is all mad, so she has to stop the pirates!"

Mr. Perry's face morphs into confusion. "Don't be ridiculous. You're not girls, and you're definitely not a witch or a pirate."

Neil shrinks. "We were just playing..."

"And what have I told you about taking out the markers without me watching? You're going to break something."

"I was being careful, Dad."

"Don't talk back to me. Especially not when there's a guest here, understand?" He waits for a nod before continuing. "Did you do any work in your science book today?"

"A little..."

He huffs. "You need to get a head start, son. You don't need to run through the house like a wild animal."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on and wash up, both of you. Neil, help your mother set the table when your done?"

Neil nods, walking upstairs. Charlie follows behind him, eyes wide and sad. "I'm sorry you got in trouble," he whispers.

"It's not your fault. And... it's okay. My dad just comes home from work mad sometimes."

Charlie nods. "My dad does that too. James says to just stay out of the way when he gets like that."

Neil nods, turning on the sink and silently washing his hands.

"Wanna do the thing where the captain rides the dragon to get the witch? Like we said?"

He keeps his head tucked down. "Maybe later."

Charlie wilts, watching Neil as if waiting for him to crack. In that moment, he decides he never, ever wants to see his best friend like that again. And he'll do whatever it takes to make sure.

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It's years later when Neil finds out. After months of unease, of asking Charlie if he was okay and if he needed to talk, after so many nights spent at the Perrys and none at the Daltons, in the middle of the summer Neil gets woken up by a knock at the door. He sneaks downstairs late at night, completely unready for what's waiting.

Charlie's standing in the doorway, arms wrapped around himself. What can be seen of him is covered in scrapes, bruises, and blood. Neil's hands fly up to cover his mouth.
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Charlie's cheeks have obvious traces of tears, but when he speaks, his voice is perfectly even. Resigned, in fact. "I didn't know where else to go."

Neil steps aside and opens the door wider. Charlie trails in. "What happened?"

"Are your parents asleep?"

Neil nods.

"I'll be gone before they wake up."

"Charlie, what happened?"

He pushes past him, looking down. "No one knows I'm here, okay? Please don't tell anyone."

Neil grabs his arm, dropping it the minute Charlie winces. "Please, Char, tell me what happened. I won't say anything."

Charlie doesn't reply.

"Can you sit on the couch? I'll get a first aid kit." Neil waits for Charlie to do so before walking off. He comes back quickly. "It'll hurt," He mumbles.

"I can take it."

Neil nods and begins. Charlie's stoic, refusing to look Neil in the eye.

"Did you fall?" Nothing. "Did you get into a fight? I won't tell if you got into a fight." Nothing. Neil's eyes go wide and sad, and he somehow musters up the will to ask. "Is it because of your dad?"

Charlie curls tighter into himself.

Neil blanches. "Oh." He'd wondered for a while, but he's never been more upset to be right about something.

There's a silence between them so loud it fills the room. Neil continues with the towel, brushing Charlie's skin so gently it's hardly getting any of the blood off.

"I've never seen you look this bad before."

Charlie ducks his head. "James always took the brunt of stuff. But he

went after Samantha. I couldn't..."

"You should stay the night. My mother will let you."

"I can't. I have to go back."

"Charlie..."

"I don't need to get in even more trouble, okay?" Charlie meets his eyes. "You can't tell anyone."

"You shouldn't keep this a secret," Neil says softly.

"I have to. YOU have to. Please, Neily."

He sighs, nodding slowly.

For about ten minutes, they sit in silence. It's broken by a whisper from Charlie. "I miss James."

Neil's face falls, and he opens his mouth, but Charlie isn't done.

"No one talks about him. Samantha barely remembers him. And she doesn't even know what really happened."

Slowly, carefully, Neil scoots closer. "What... Really happened?"

Charlie looks down. "Slit his wrists and killed himself. Guess he couldn't handle our dad's bullshit anymore."

Neil's eyes widen, and he whispers, almost just to himself, "People can do that?"

Charlie speaks again, grabbing his attention. "I'm the one that found him. We told everybody there was an accident. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. I just... I miss him. I miss talking about him."

Neil hugs him, and Charlie flinches before promptly melting into the hug. "You can't leave me, okay? Not ever."

"Okay."

"You have to promise."

"I promise," He says immediately. "We're in this together, yeah? Always."

Charlie hugs back.

~~~***~~~

Richard Cameron becomes one of Charlie's greatest enemies, and with good reason.

"What if we don't see each other?"

Neil laughs. "Charlie, you have basically every class with me."

"That isn't enough, Perry, and you know it."

"I'll barge into your room all the time, okay?"

Charlie shoulders him. "You better not. Wouldn't want you seeing his freckled ass on accident."

"You should try being nice to him," Neil rolls his eyes. "He's your roommate, after all."

"That's not my fault! He stole your spot."

"New transfer, new rooming. You know how it is." Charlie huffs, and Neil snorts. "You're so dramatic."

"You're one to talk."

"Look, remember how upset Meeks and Knox were when they got split last year? And now Meeks and Pitts are basically inseparable."

"And Knox is alone..." He pouts. "And so are you!"

"I know, no one to cuddle when that damn heater breaks. How will I manage?"

Charlie shrugs.

"I'll probably have a new roommate by next year, though."

"Someone new to cuddle?"

"Shut up!" He grins. "Look Char, get friendly with new guy. Just not too friendly."

Charlie wiggles his eyebrows, and Neil wrinkles his nose.

"Tell him he's not allowed to be your best friend, because that seat is
~~~

taken."

"Really?" Charlie mimes looking amazed. "Pitts and I are that close already?"

"Ha ha, asshole."

"Bitch."

"You love me."

"Mmm, I suppose."

"Rude!"

Charlie grins. "Well, even if you're not barging into my room, I'm definitely barging into yours like, once a week."

"You better not."

"Why? Afraid I'm gonna catch you jerking it?"

Neil's eyes light up with laughter. "Charlie!"

"It's perfectly healthy for young men, Neily, no need to be embarrassed."

"Shut up!"

"Never."

Their laughter travels all the way down the end of the hall.

~~~

"What time is it?" Neil asks hoarsely.

"3am."

"Oh."

Charlie sighs. "How long has this been going on?"

"This was the first time."

"Don't lie to me, Neil."

Neil looks away before speaking. "You remember in seventh grade,
~~~

with the pin?"

"You... you promised you weren't going to do that again."

"I'm sorry, alright? I didn't mean for it to become a habit."

"You could've died tonight! Do you realize that?!"

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, Neil, this isn't nothing!"

Neil's voice fills with defeat. "Just leave me alone, okay?"

"Please, Neily, just talk to me."

"Stop, Charlie."

~~~

After what's been dubbed by both of them as "The Incident", Charlie texts Neil non-stop over the break. Neil replies diligently, insisting that he is "fine, Charlie, honestly it was a one-time thing", which Charlie has no problem arguing with. He saw the scars. Frankly, it would be hard not to.

And no matter how many times Neil insists that he feels much, much better, Charlie can't get rid of the image of a blood-soaked Neil sprawled out on his bed. It was a close call. Too fucking close. And Neil Perry was not going to die on his watch.

Eventually, as the summer winds to a close, Neil makes him promise he'll at least pretend things are normal. Charlie agrees, finally beginning to convince himself things really are fine.

~~~

"Rumor has it... You did summer school."

Neil chuckles. "Yep. Chemistry." He turns to Knox and Meeks, raising his eyebrows. "My father thought I should get ahead."

The boys all share a slight eyeroll.

He turns back to Charlie. "How was your summer, slick?" He grins, but there's a certain undercut to it that Charlie's sure only he can hear.

"Keen." Charlie walks in past him, and brushed Neil's shoulder slightly. Neil reads it loud and clear: "We'll talk for real later". Charlie turns back to the doorway. "Meeks. Door. Closed."

"Yes, sir." The boys trail in.

Neil heads toward the window, grinning. "Gentlemen, what are the four pillars?"

The answer rings loud and clear. Charlie smirks, obviously entertained, and makes a beeline for Neil's bed. "Okay, study group. Meeks aced Latin, I didn't quite flunk English. So, if you want, we've got our study group."

"Sure," Neil nods along. "Cameron asked me too. Anyone mind including him?"

"Mmm, I dunno. What's his speciality, bootlicking?"

"Come on, he's your roommate," Neil reminds.

"That's not my fault!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Charlie and Neil turn back. "My name is Steven Meeks."

Neil jumps up. "Oh, this is Todd Anderson."

Charlie scans Neil carefully as he says it and feels a sinking feeling in his stomach. Neil has an excellent track record of developing crushes on any and every boy, and it never ends well. Charlie rolls his eyes a bit. Of course the same would happen with his roommate.

He looks over the boy. Todd Anderson. Looks like more of a mouse than a boy, but that is Neil's type. The soft, shy, artsy kind. One of many reasons why him trying to date Neil didn't work.

He watches Meeks and Todd shake hands, glancing up at Neil. His eyes are watching carefully. Charlie smirks. "Charlie Dalton."

Todd looks over at him, slightly uncomfortable. Charlie thinks he'll be fun. He continues smoking as they talk, heart warming a bit. God, he missed this.

The good feeling shatters at the knock on the door. He begins stamping out the cig, annoyed. Probably Cameron.

It's a bit worse.

"Father. I thought you'd gone."

Charlie's eyes flicker back between the two. He sees Neil's heart stop, practically feeling it himself. He hates Neil's dad. Hates his own. Hates the fact that Welton Academy breeds shitty parenting like a disease. He watches Mr. Perry escort Neil out, hopelessness and fury coiling in his chest.

He waits until he can't hear voices outside the door and jumps up from the bed. He hears Knox and Meeks following behind him.

"Why doesn't he let you do what you want?"

Knox voices his agreement, encouraging him to put a stop to it, and Neil scoffs. "Oh, that's rich. Like you guys tell your parents off? Mr. Future Lawyer and Mr. Future Banker?"

Charlie bristles, hurt, but manages a grimace-like smile out of it. "Okay, so I don't like it any more than you do."

"Well, just don't tell me how to talk to my father." He says defensively, and Charlie deflates.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"What I have to. Drop the annual."

Neil looks so sad, and Charlie knows he should be mad, and he is, but Jesus, he just wants him to stop looking like a lost little kid for two seconds. He speaks up, trying to lighten the mood.

"Well, I wouldn't lose too much sleep over it. It's just a bunch of jerks trying to impress Nolan."

"I don't care," Neil says quickly. "I don't give a damn about any of it."

Charlie looks away, uncomfortable, and tries to shake the sudden realization that this year might not be better than the last.

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He's right.
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He realizes he's right when he watches Neil's face from the backseat of his father's convertible, leaving Henley Hall.

He realizes when he texts Neil multiple times, everything from "You were so good in the play" to "Don't listen to your father, whatever he says". No replies.

"Please text me back?"

He's trying, really trying not to assume the worst. But the... The tension. Between Neil and Mr. Perry. The fear and the anger. It's too familiar, and he doesn't like it.

"Can I turn the light off?"

Charlie's head jerks up, and he turns to Cameron.

"I'm going to bed. Can I turn off the light?"

"Yeah. Yeah, whatever."

Darkness fills the room, and he hears Cameron huff. "He'll be fine, Nuwanda. What's his dad gonna do, kill him?"

It's not his dad I'm worried about, Charlie wants to say. Instead, he snaps, "Charlie."

"Hm?"

"Don't call me Nuwanda." He can't go by that name, not right now. All he can think of is, "Dammit, Neil, the name's Nuwanda".

There's a minute of silence. "...Alright."

Charlie sits up in his bed. It's too familiar, and he doesn't know why. It's beyond Neil and Mr. Perry familiar. It's... He doesn't want to say it, because he knows he's being paranoid, but it's James familiar. James and him.

He pulls the covers up over himself. Neil would not try to kill himself. He wouldn't. Still, the memory of last year fills his mind, Neil bleeding out on the bed. What if that's happening now, right now, and Charlie's doing nothing?

Screw it. If he can sneak out for dumbass forest poetry, he can sneak out to make sure his best friend is okay. He climbs out of the bed, throwing on a coat.

The light flicks on. "What are you doing?"

"Going to Neil's."

Cameron rolls his eyes. "Just text him if you're that worried."

"He won't answer."

"You realize it's snowing?"

Charlie ignores him, slipping on his shoes.

"You're crazy." Cameron's voice drips with patronization. "He's fine. Just relax."

"Suck a dick."

"Whatever. Your funeral." Cameron rolls back over, blanket pulled over him, and Charlie barely casts him a glance before walking out.

He's quiet and slow, well-accustomed to sneaking out of the school. Still, he wishes he could just run for it. His heart is pounding, mind racing, so distracted that he almost misses the light on in Nolan's office. He freezes, ducking behind the doorway and listening carefully.

"And you'll need to collect his assignments. His father expects him to make a full recovery." Nolan. Charlie rolls his eyes, frustrated. Whatever he's talking about couldn't wait until morning?

"I just can't believe it. Did he say what happened?" McAllister.

"Evidently, he was rifling through his father's things and set it off."

"An accident, then."

"So it seems."

"And the doctors say..."

"He'll be fine. Back by the end of the month. I'll ask you to gather any assignments and hand them off to his roommate."

"Of course. Remind me who he's rooming with?"

"The Anderson boy, I believe."

Charlie's blood runs cold.

"He'll be excused from all classes of course, and he'll be dropping chemistry club due to physical therapy."

"Physical therapy?"

"To ensure his shoulder is in working order. A gunshot... It's a miracle it wasn't worse."

Silence. McAllister doesn't reply. Numbly, he realizes he needs to get up and move. He'll be in massive trouble if he's caught out of bed, double for eavesdropping. And he just got paddled.

It doesn't feel as though it's his own mind moving him. He stands and leaves, walking back to the room. But it's not him. He's not even sure he's awake. Maybe he's dreaming. Maybe Neil already came home.

Maybe it was just an accident.

It wasn't an accident. Neil texted him, the first week of the break, late at night, frantic. Asking if he could call. It took so long to get Neil calm enough to speak, and even then it was between stutters and sobs. He wouldn't stop talking about the gun in the desk drawer.

Charlie got him to calm down, to promise he wouldn't do anything rash, but now he remembers it's there. And he knows, whatever happened, whatever his parents said to him, that Neil remembered too.

And he's furious. Furious at Neil's parents for making him feel like that, furious at himself for not doing anything. Furious at Neil, because Neil promised they'd be in this together, always. Charlie can't live without Neil. He can't. And he... He almost had to.

"Nuwanda?"

What if the doctors got it wrong? What if Neil isn't okay? What if he doesn't get better?

"...Charlie?" A hand brushes his shoulder, and he jumps.

"Jesus, calm down." The voice- it's Cameron, Cameron's voice- is full of concern. That's not what his voice is supposed to sound like. "What's wrong?"

He looks up at him. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Somebody has to tell Cameron. Somebody has to tell Cameron, and Meeks, and Pitts, and

Knox, and... And Todd.

And it has to be him.

Chapter End Notes

Aaand there it is! Finally!

We'll be tackling what happened after last chapter next time, but I felt like it was appropriate to get some backstory on Neil and Charlie's friendship first.

I ended up really invested in this chapter (which is probably why it's longer than normal), so hopefully you all enjoyed it too!

As always, thanks so much to everyone for kudos, comments, etc. Have a good day/night.

And finally, shoutout to my best friend for letting me borrow his Charlie characterization & headcanons that I now consider canon.

On Such A Timeless Flight

Chapter Notes

Back to the present!

Warnings for: referenced self harm, death mention, and some spiraling thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Charlie wakes up, Neil's sitting on Cameron's bed, doing some worksheet for history. He clears his throat, and they both look up.

Cameron waves absentmindedly, muttering a "Morning, sleeping beauty" without looking up. Neil, in contrast, sits up a little straighter, looking at him.

"Hey," Charlie says evenly. "Sleep okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks for last night."

"Sure." Charlie pauses, clearly hesitant, before continuing. "Listen, I know you feel like we're babying you-"

"We are," Cameron cuts in, recieving a glare in return.

"It's just because we care, and we're worried."

"I know."

"BUT," he continues, "I think we might've been going a bit overboard."

Neil's eyes widen.

"I don't want you to feel like we don't trust you... Like I don't trust you. You're my brother, Neil. Look, I'm gonna talk to the guys. Get rid of the schedule."

"Seriously?"

He nods. "I mean, we've got your money and everything, so it's not like you can do much." Neill shifts guiltily, but it goes unnoticed. "Just promise if something happens, or you're having a bad day, you'll talk to us."

Neil's heart jumps, and he nods quickly. "Of course."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Charlie looks at him scrutinizingly for another moment before nodding, seemingly satisfied. "Please don't make me regret this."

"I won't, Charlie, honest to God." He stands up from the bed. "I'm gonna go shower and change. I'll see you later?"

Charlie nods, watching Neil practically run out the door.

"It's a bad idea."

Charlie's eyes narrow, and he says a flat "Shut up, Dick," without turning around.

"I'm serious." Cameron shoves the textbook aside. "He's going to get himself into something stupid."

Charlie whirls around, face scrunched up. "No one asked." He receives a shaking head in reply, and glares.

Cameron stands. "I don't trust him. And I think the only reason you're trusting him is because you don't want to believe there's anything not to trust. You want to convince yourself there's nothing to worry about. And you don't want him to be mad at you. You want him happy, which is sweet, but-"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine." He shrugs loosely. "But he can't be happy if he's dead."

Charlie's head jerks up, ready to reply, but Cameron's already turned back to the homework. He shakes his head, trying to swallow the unease in his stomach.

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Neil makes a beeline for the town nearby, barely stopping to breathe. It's biting cold, and his scarf does little to block anything out, but he doesn't care.

He runs into the convenience store, stacking a couple packs of refill razor blades and a mini first aid kit into a basket, as well as a bag of
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chocolate, because why the hell not? It uses up a majority of the money he took, which is fine, because he shouldn't need anything else anyways.

As he's leaving the store, he sees Todd and jumps, running to get out of sight. Todd doesn't seem to notice, walking right past him without care. Neil watches.

He's bundled up; a thick, red and black coat wrapped around him, and his head low. He doesn't seem as though he's walking with any kind of purpose, more like aimless wandering, and it makes Neil's heart ache, especially when Todd walks past Walters & Jack.

It's a small, cozy bookshop, and it's their place. Neil and Todd had gone practically every weekend the past few months, Neil picking up some play, Todd poetry, and the two of them sitting on one of the many couches to read. There was always some soft indie-pop song playing that Neil would try to find the tune and hum along to, but it was still quiet enough to keep Todd relaxed and content.

They had their very first real date there, Neil remembers. He'd been a downright mess, reeling as Charlie and Knox desperately tried to calm him down and get him ready. He'd ended up wearing something he thought made him look ridiculous, but when he met up with Todd outside their dorm, Todd blushed wildly, so it must not have been so bad.

Todd looked absolutely amazing, a fact Neil remembers vividly well. Handsome, and cute, and... beautiful. They went a few different places around town, a cafe, a thrift shop, but the divide between them was so thick with tension you could cut it with a steak knife. They couldn't kiss, couldn't hold hands, couldn't even brush up against each other.

Then, they found the bookshop, and the couches there that were so small it would be IMPOSSIBLE not to be squashed together, meaning no one batted an eye. It was perfect.

It was perfect, Neil remembers, and now Todd's walked past like he doesn't. Or at the very least, doesn't care. All of the sudden, a question Neil hadn't even considered pops into his head: Are they still together?

They hadn't talked. Todd hadn't said anything, one way or the other. Neil hadn't been dumped, but their latest interactions definitely didn't hold the same level of intimacy and affection as before.

Before he can stop himself, Neil has phone out, frantically texting and

hitting send. He immediately regrets it. What on God's green Earth possessed him to do that?

The reply comes quickly.

"I love you, Neil. I'm always going to. But I think you really need to focus on yourself right now. Maybe we should put things on pause for a while."

Somehow, he manages to type back an "Ok" before he slides to the ground. It's not that bad, he tells himself. It could've been a lot, lot worse. They're still together. Todd still loves him. They're just... On a break.

But what is Todd defining as a break? Can they still sleep next to each other? Is that too much? They did that even before they confessed their feelings to each other, but has that ruled changed?

God, are they both single now? Is Todd going to walk down to breakfast the next day with his arms linked to another guy? What if Todd finds someone he likes more? Can the break turn into a break up if it lasts long enough?

Neil grabs a fistfull of hair, pulling hard in an attempt to ground himself. He needs to breathe. It's fine. All of this will be fine. Panicking isn't going to help anything.

He gets himself together and looks up. Todd's gone. Maybe back at school already. He stands, casting another look towards the bookstore, before heading that way.

The cashier's very friendly, all laughs and "I haven't seen you in forever, thought you'd graduated!". It uses up the last of the money, but Neil doesn't mind. The cashier smiles wide as she bags the book, handing it to Neil with a "This one's for your friend, isn't it? Tell him he needs to come with you next time! You two are our regulars!"

Neil leaves, bag pulled up against his shoulder, standing a bit more confidently than before. He and Todd are stronger than this, a fact he's confident in. It doesn't matter if they're on break for three years. They love each other. They have something special. And if Todd dates someone else, or doesn't want to sit next to Neil in stores anymore, than that is a-okay. He's still one of Neil's best friends.

And, he thinks, hesitantly hopeful, if they DO end up back together, than Neil has a gift he knows Todd will like waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

Idk if that ending qualifies as brief fluff or not :/

ALSO this story has lit er ally passed 50 kudos and ahhh thank you all so so much!! I'm so so greatful and glad you guys are enjoying!

Reflections You Used To See Never Looked Alike To Me

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: mention/discussion of, for lack of a better description, a woman in lingerie, and cannibalism (I promise this will make sense in context of the chapter), as well as Neil's father being a semi-asshole.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Neil comes back from town, it seems like everything's sorted out. Charlie comes up to tell him that he talked it over with the guys and they all agreed, adding that "Cameron's still being a dick, so what else is new?" He grins, the first genuine smile he's seen from Charlie since he left the auditorium at Henley Hall. Inwardly, Neil lets out a massive sigh of relief. At least Charlie's finally back to normal.

Despite everything, there's a naive, hopeful part of him that thinks as long as Charlie is back in his corner, things will work themselves out. It's perhaps a bit foolish, but he can't find it in himself to care.

Instead, he goes along with Charlie's jokes, adding on and laughing when appropriate, excited when the rest of the guys start to seem less on-edge. The group starts trading stories again, just like they used to. Charlie saying something just outrageous enough to make Cameron flush, Knox lamenting that he's done chasing Chris, Meeks and Pitts trying to keep the volume down and get them actually studying, and Todd shaking his head silently, a small, amused smirk creeping up and onto his face.

The only thing Neil hates is that about 90% of their conversation ends up being about whatever Keating's lesson of the day was. It's entertaining, of course, but he can't stop thinking about how much better it would be to actually experience the classes for himself. Still, he muses during dinner the next day, it's better than nothing.

"How'd the test go today?"

Pitts barks out a laugh. "I dunno. Knox, you wanna explain?"

Knox, bright red, plants his face down on the table. "Not really."

Charlie swings an arm around him, winking at Neil. "C'mon Knoxious, the Cap did it just for you, I'll bet."

Knox mutters unintelligibly, and Charlie leans closer. "One more time, love?"

"Fuck off."

Neil looks around, eyes bright. "What? What happened?"

Pitts jumps up. "He had a pin up on the board. Of a woman. DURING the test."

"What?"

"All done up in lingerie."

"It was highly inappropriate," Cameron scoffs. "He could get in serious trouble."

"It was hilarious!" Pitts argues. "Half the class couldn't even focus."

"Except the fact that half of us aren't straight," Meeks grins, high-fiving Pitts.

"And Knox here-"

"Back off, Pitts, I called dibs on telling him!" Charlie clears his throat. "I look in front of me, right?"

"To copy the answers."

"Shut it, Dick. I look at his paper, and Knox hasn't answered shit! He's just writing "C & K" over and over again!"

"It wasn't about Chris..." Knox interjects.

"Oh?" Charlie lights up. "Well, well, well, Cam, you've got an admirer!"

"Jerk."

"I'm surprised you weren't more distracted," Neil looks up at Charlie.

"Please. There isn't a thing that man can show me that I haven't seen before."

Neil laughs. "Sure, Nuwanda."

The table quiets.

"What?" Neil looks around, confused.

"I don't go by that anymore."

"Wait, really? When'd that happen?"

"I just don't, alright?" He says it firmly, no room for argument.

Neil falters. "Okay."

They look at each other a minute, before Charlie's voice lightens. "Anyway. How was Mr. Brenner's?"

Neil rolls his eyes. "Terrific. Fantastic. We read essays today."

"That sounds fun."

"Oh, it was a thrill, Meeks. We learned all about why Jonathan Swift thinks eating babies will solve the famine in Ireland."

"I remember that one. It was... Interesting?"

"Yeah, if it weren't for the fact that we already read that last year! I can probably quote that by now. And of course he had to spend fifty minutes explaining that it's satire, because no one believed him." He pouts. "Meanwhile you guys are reading The Illiad."

"God, it's stupid."

"For you, maybe. I love Homer."

"More like homo-"

"Ha ha, Charlie."

Todd frowns. "They'll probably get into more interesting stuff soon, Neil."

"We're almost halfway through the year. It can't get better."

"You don't know that."

Neil snorts. "It's whatever. At least I don't have porn on display while I'm testing."

"Like it would've affected you." Todd smiles lightly.

"Touche."

They fall back into a comfortable silence, aside from multiple people muttering for Charlie to stop stealing food from their plates.

Neil picks around. He's lost in thought more than anything else, which means he jumps when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

"You good?" Pitts looks bewildered.

"Notification," Neil rolls his eyes a bit self-deprecatingly.

Pitts snorts at that, turning away again, and Neil does the same, until his phone starts buzzing again.

Neil huffs. "Is Nolan around?"

Three seperate voices, each with their own badly-done Nolan impression, say, "No phones out in the dining hall, young man."

"Thanks, guys. Real helpful."

A minute passes. The buzzing starts again.

"You're popular," Meeks comments.

Neil stands. "I'll be back in a minute."

He ducks out of the room, standing underneath a staircase to pull out his phone.

It's his father. Because of course it is.

Sighing, he swipes to answer. "Hello?"

"Neil."

"It's... Dinner." He treads carefully.

"I'm aware. Your mother and I are about to head out, but I wanted to call and see how you were doing."

"Ah."

"You were supposed to call earlier this week."

Neil blanches a bit. "Right. Sorry."

His father drops it, something Neil isn't going to argue about.

"Things are going good."

" 'Well', Neil."

"Going well," He amends.

"How is the... Shoulder?"

"Better."

"You're doing the exercises the doctor recommended, I trust?"

"Yes, sir."

They lapse back into silence.

"Father-"

"I wanted to call to remind you about the Forensics test tomorrow."

Crap. The what?

"I realize they don't typically give reminders for these sorts of things, but I spoke with your teacher about you missing the midfinal, and he is giving you the opportunity to take it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Father, I haven't studied."

"If you had called when you were supposed to, you could've had more time. Still, you'll have tonight."

"Is there any way I could speak with him about rescheduling? The midfinal is a large bit of my grade, and the material is-"

"The material is well within your capability, Neil. And you're lucky he's letting you make this up as it is."

"I was in the hospital..."

"And now you aren't. So, tomorrow morning."

He sighs quietly enough to not be heard. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Study tonight."

"I will."

There's a pause. This is where most people would say, "I love you. Talk to you later," he expects.

Instead, his father simply says, "Call next Monday."

The line goes dead.

Chapter End Notes

So that's officially the weirdest chapter warnings.

Shoutout to anyone else who's read the older draft of the DPS script, saw the bit about Keating doing THAT during the test, and thought to themselves, "what the fuck".

The full script is here if anyone is curious: http://www10.pair.com/crazydv/weir/dps/earlydraft.html . Keating was somehow... So much weirder.

Also happy late Valentine's day! Love y'all 💕

You Came Out Of Nowhere And You Cut Through All The Noise

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: Very descriptive spiraling thoughts and panic attack, and a lot of negative self-talk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Right as Neil turns around to gather himself, people begin to pour out of the dining hall. He hangs back, joining the group once he sees them. He brushes off their questions, simply saying "My father wanted to check on me," and leaving it at that.

They walk a bit longer before splitting, Todd following Neil up to their room diligently. As soon as they get in, Neil makes a beeline for the desk, grabbing a stack of various supplies and dumping them onto his bed.

Todd peers over. "Do we have homework?"

"Nope. Forensics test tomorrow. Just me."

"Test?" Todd lays down, pulling the covers up over himself. "Didn't you just have your midterm?"

He shakes his head without looking up. "That's this. I'm making it up. Gotta study."

"Oh." He glances over. Neil looks as if he's in a frenzy, already set to what looks like color-coded, illustrated flashcards. "Do you want help?"

"I'm good."

"Okay..." Todd frowns. "Don't stay up too late, alright? And-"

"It would be a lot easier to study if you'd stop talking and let me focus," Neil snaps.

Todd quiets.

Neil instantly looks guilty. "Sorry. Just- stressed. Sorry."

Todd shakes his head. "Just... Wake me up if you need me, okay? You look like you're about to break down."

"I'm fine," He dismisses instantly. "Thanks though. G' night."

"Goodnight..." Neil's already turned away. Todd sighs, a sinking feeling already growing in his chest. He falls asleep in about an hour.

Neil, meanwhile, tackles the task calmly. He is perfectly, 100% calm. It's only a little after 7. He has plenty of time. He'll run through the flashcards, then go through his old notes, read over the homework, and a study guide (he'll have to remake it, but that's FINE, he's got it), and then he'll re-read the textbook.

It's pretty long, sure, and wordy, but he has PLENTY of time. He'll run through that, then repeat everything, then find a practice test online. He'll be done in less than an hour if he crams. It'll be fine.

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It's 4 in the morning. It is 4 in the morning, and Todd's asleep, and Neil wants to be, God, he wants to be, but he's been stuck on #12 for how long? How long? He started working at 7:30, he knew he'd read at least 3 chapters of the textbook, but he couldn't remember any of them. Shit, he'd wasted hours and he had no time to waste, and Todd is snoring, Todd is asleep, and if Neil doesn't stop hyperventilating he'll wake him up.

He's crying, when did he start crying? He started working at 7:30, and now his cheeks and blanket and book are damp with tears, fuck, his book, he's supposed to be reading. He's supposed to be the honor roll student, he's supposed to go on to the Ivy League, he's supposed to discover cures and save millions of lives, he's supposed to be a good son, and fuck. He was supposed to tell Todd if he started spiraling again, but no, no, Todd is supposed to be asleep, and Neil is not going to screw that up, just like he screws up e v e r y t h i n g.

And shit, he's sobbing now, Todd is going to wake up and it's going to be all his fault. Todd needs to sleep, he has class tomorrow. They have class tomorrow, and Neil is crying, but he's supposed to be studying, when did he start crying? He started working at 7:30, and now it's 4, and he hasn't learned ANYTHING.

"Neil?"

God, he knew it, and now Todd is going to be worried about him, and
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fuck, Todd told him not to stay up too late, he's the best, and Neil is the worst. Neil is going to ruin him, just like he ruins e v e r y t h i n g!

"Hey, hey, focus on me. Listen to my voice, okay?"

And he's crying even harder now, he's quite honestly surprised he hasn't woken up the whole school by now, because he can't figure out how to just SHUT UP! He's being loud, and he's being a burden, and he's going to fail this test, fail everyth-

Hand. There's a hand on his shoulder, and he can't look because Todd is going to look sad, because Neil can't just be happy, can't just be the actor-

"Neil."

Hand, hand, just focus on the fucking hand...

"Good. Just stay focused on me, okay? It's just me. You're okay."

Except he isn't okay, he isn't okay at all, but he is SUPPOSED to be, he needs to be oka- and the hand is rubbing his shoulder, and when did he get so t e n s e? When did Todd wake up? When did he start crying? He started working at 7:30-

There's another hand now, one combing through his hair, and shit, he is so, so scared, but he has to focus on the hands, and the voice- the voice is saying something. Todd. Todd's voice is talking.

"You're okay, it's going to be okay. Breathe, Neil."

Neil, Neil, his name is Neil, and he's with Todd.

"It's just me and you. Good, that's perfect. Just like that, Neil. In and out."

In and out, he can do that, can't he? He can do something, right? Right? He used to be able to, before he started-

"Hey, stay with me. Don't go back in your head, yeah? It's okay."

It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Todd's with you, and you're okay. You're okay...

There's a hand on his shoulder, and a hand in his hair, and his breathing is finally starting to even out, and woah. Wait. When did he

stop crying? Todd is singing something now, which is special. Todd doesn't like singing in front of people, but he knows Neil loves it, loves hearing his voice, because it calms him down and makes him happy. And Neil wants to know what Todd is singing, so he puts all his energy into breathing and turning off his thoughts so he can listen.

"All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arrive... Blackbird fly, blackbird fly, into the light of the dark, black night..."

Neil's eyes are starting to close. His breathing is slow and even. He wants to open his mouth and thank Todd. He wants to tell him how much he loves him. He wants to apologize, for everything. He wants to, but he's starting to melt into Todd's arms. And he really, really doesn't want to move. He doesn't want Todd to stop singing.

He can feel himself drifting off, and he hopes Todd won't mind waiting to talk until morning.

Chapter End Notes

I know this update took a while, and I'm rlly sorry. Life got hectic for a little while. But I should be back now! As always, hope you all enjoyed 💕💕

A L S O. This fic broke 69 kudos... Nice 👌

I'm Through, I'm Done, I've Had Enough

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: Aftermath of a panic attack, touch-starvation, hospital mention, and alcohol mention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Neil wakes up, Todd still has his arms wrapped around him. He yawns, and Todd's head drops onto his shoulder lightly. "Morning."

Neil smiles warmly at him. "Hey. Thanks for last night."

"Course." Todd says it softly, sincerely, like it's the easiest thing in the world, and Neil thinks he could marry him on the spot and be the luckiest person in the world. "Next time, wake me up?"

"Yeah." He stretches, climbing out of the bed. "Bad news is, I'm definitely going to fail this test."

"You have two periods before then, don't you? You have some time to study."

Neil looks at him a minute, before burying his head in his hands. "Two peri... I could've... Oh, I'm an idiot."

"Only sometimes."

He groans, shaking his head. "Oh, well. Read a bit of it at least."

"Very true."

"And," He grins, "Got to hear your pretty voice. The Beatles, huh?"

Todd smiles wryly. "Honestly, if you wanted to hear me sing that badly, you could've just asked. No need to go through all that."

Neil laughs, honest to God laughs, the first real laugh he's given in ages, and Todd swears he could grow old in some nursing home with him, and not regret a second of it.

"You seem like you're in a good mood," Todd comments, and Neil nods. He knows exactly why, too. Last night was the first good sleep he had in ages.

He'd missed how nice it was to fall asleep with someone cuddling him. He'd been so caught up in his own self-loathing, terrified his need for touch would be a burden, that he'd forgotten Todd's touch-starved as well.

Neil's taken out of his thoughts by Todd holding out a hand. "Breakfast?"

Neil takes it, smiling. "Yeah."

There's a noticeable change in Neil that day. Everyone notices, but no one says anything, other than making cautiously optimistic eye contact that says "you see it too?"

It's like he's simultaneously stopped and started caring. He starts engaging, REALLY engaging again, in everything from conversations to schoolwork. But beyond that, there's a certain defiant nature to his actions. Like he's suddenly decided he doesn't want to be Welton's golden boy anymore.

It's reminiscent of back when the Dead Poets Society was first coming together, a parallel that both exhilarates and worries his friends. However, it's clear that even if they were to say something, their concerns would go unheard. Neil is bleeding determination. Mind completely made up.

It isn't until dinner that Neil says what they've all been thinking. "I've done a lot of thinking. About what I want to be like." The scraping of silverware against porcelain stops as the boys listen with rapt attention.

Neil's voice quiets. "Who I've been these last couple weeks... That's not who I want to be. I..." He hesitates before continuing resolutely. "I want to be happy. And I want to take action to do that." The Poets exchanges small smiles.

"That's why I'm going to try out for another play."

The looks Neil receives make him feel like he's back in the hospital all over again.

"Neil, you're..."

"You're crazy."

"You can't be serious."

"Neil..."

His face falls. "Not the reaction I was hoping for."

Knox sighs. "Neil, we're all for you doing something that makes you happy, but is this the best option?"

"Your father will never go for it."

"Neither will Nolan."

"Not to mention-"

Neil cuts them all off.

"I've never been happier than I was when I was in A Midsummer Night's Dream. It was like..... Flying. I want to feel like that again."

Todd looks at him. "We're not going to be able to talk you out of this, are we?"

A grin creeps up on Neil's face. "Nuh-uh."

"Do you even know what play you're doing?"

He turns to Pitts, grin widening. "Nuh-uh."

"You're crazy," Cameron shakes his head.

"You better believe it."

The only problem with the new plan is that when Neil checks, he discovers Henley Hall only does one a year. Midsummer was it. For a moment, he's seized by the heart-numbing fear of that being the end of it. Then he gets an idea.

"Hello, Danburry residence?"

Neil drums his fingers against the side of the wall. "Gin?"

The voice on the line loudens. "Neil?! I thought you were in the hospital!"

"I'm out."

"You ass!" There's a pause, a quieter "Sorry, Mom" and then she's back. "The cast was worried sick!"

"I'm sorry." He really is. "How is everyone?"

"Post-Show Depression. You know how it is." He doesn't. Well, he sort of does. "But how are you? I bet school's still hell- yes, Mom, people say hell!"

He smiles a bit at that. "Getting better. Ginny, listen. You do plays outside of school, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, trying to, at least. Why?"

He takes a deep breath. "I really wanna do another show. I don't suppose you know anything upcoming?"

There's silence for a moment before she gasps. "I actually saw audition posters the other day. But nothing in your field."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for starters, it's a musical."

Neil's eyes sparkle. "Are you kidding, Gin? That's perfect!"

Her voice lifts. "Oh! Nice. But it's not something your parents would like." She mumbles so quietly he can barely here, "It's really explicit."

"My dad won't be happy no matter what. I say go big or go home."

Ginny's voice fills with worry, going even quieter. "No, Neil, I mean it. It's really rough. The only reason I'm getting away with it is my parents are totally oblivious. I mean, they never even notice when Chet throws a kegger. They'd kill me otherwise."

Neil rolls his eyes lightly. "Look, I've listened to Heathers, okay? What is it?"

"Spring Awakening."

"Oh. I don't know that one."

"Oh, you have to watch it, it's so good! There's a boot on Youtube, I'll send you a link. But, it's... Really not a good idea for you to audition."

"Carpe Diem."

He hears her sigh. "You're still on that, then?"

"Yep."

"Alright. Don't say I didn't warn you, though! I'll send you the details."

He smiles. "You're the best."

"No shit. I'll come to Welton after school and we can walk together?"

"Uh..." He blanches. "How about I meet you at Henley?"

Her voice returns to its normal volume. "Cool cool. See ya."

"Bye."

He hangs up, chest pounding. Fuck. He was hoping for more Shakespeare. At least that's educational. But a musical? That's going to be WAY harder to justify when- if- his father finds out. Still, he thinks, she was probably exaggerating the whole "explicit" thing. Just trying to scare him off.

His phone goes off, signaling Ginny's texting. He screenshots the poster and plugs in his earbuds, tapping the link. It can't be anything too bad.

About two and a half hours later, his earbuds sit in his ears, completely forgotten. Tears stream down his face in neat, even lines that cross over each other.

His first thought is holy shit. Holy. Shit.

His second thought is that if his father, or mother for that matter, ever caught wind that's he's even aware of what this show is, he'd be dead.

His third thought is that he absolutely, undoubtedly, HAS to be in this show.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Ginny is going to be a character in this story. It's what she deserves. ✊✊

Basically, my thought process for this universe is that Ginny was Hermia in Midsummer, they met, and became besties.

And yes, Neil & Ginny are doing Spring Awakening. Why? Because it's my fanfiction and I get to decide how niche it gets.

For people that don't know the show: don't worry. It's not going to be a super big plot element, and any necessary stuff will be given in exposition at some point. For those that DO know the show: anyone that guesses what roles Ginny & Neil are going to get wins a cookie 👀👀

I'm Ready To Suffer And I'm Ready To Hope

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: brief self-harm, mentions of panic attacks, and a cult mention (as a joke)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil wakes up bright and early, with a plan. Today is going to be a very good day, if all goes according to plan, and he's going to make sure it does. He wakes up at roughly 4:30 in the morning, thanks to an alarm clock Todd easily sleeps through. He's pretty certain Todd could sleep through anything, which he finds very cute.

He wriggles out of Todd's hold, putting a hand to his and interlocking the fingers with a gentle squeeze. The very first time Neil had ever done that, they had only known each other a few months. Todd was having a panic attack Neil couldn't break him out of like he usually could, and when Todd's hands found his hair, gripping tightly and pulling, Neil made a move for his hands, thinking it would be what he'd like if he was in Todd's position.

The minute their fingertips connected, Todd jerked his head up. Neil began to pull away, but Todd held on, stammering out a "please". Slowly, their bodies slumped into a relaxed state, just their hands connected.

They were a lot less worried about brushing shoulders after that.

Neil watches Todd a second, just to make sure he hasn't woken him up by moving, and continuing to move once he's sure he hasn't. He grabs a bag and leaves for the bathroom. He enters a stall, and cuts.

It's simple. No particular passion or emotion to it. Just the fact that his skin had been itching ever since him spiraling over the Forensics test. He smiles, cleaning up and returning the bag to his room, but he's not done yet. The next part of his perfect-day plan is a bit more risky. It's also a bit more important.

He heads down the hallway, fist tightly closed around a twisted paper clip. Charlie had given it to him years ago, insisting that lock-picking was an invaluable skill. For the first time, Neil's inclined to agree. He's torn between feeling proud or ashamed as he breaks into Keating's classroom. Still, he reminds himself, it's for a completely innocent

reason. It's not like he's stealing the answer key to a quiz.

He's just going to his desk. It's likely someone's else's desk now, but he's counting on his things still being there. He opens up the top of the desk to find a pile of notebooks and supplies with the name Matthews written on them. One of the guys in the back. He pushes it all aside, and almost shouts in victory. Hidden all the way at the bottom, and banged up as ever: Five Centuries Of Verse.

He opens the book, tracing the scrawled quote. He slips the book into the pocket of his coat, smiling softly. Two things down, pulled off without a hitch. Finally, luck is on his side again.

Neil easily sneaks back into the dorm, and, to make a great thing greater, Todd's still asleep. So, he settles back in bed, phone out so he can go over his monolouge. Auditions are today, and Neil Perry is nothing if not well-prepared.

Todd wakes up about half an hour later, at first worried that Neil's up. After a quick reassurance, the light it turned on and they're ready to get the day started.

Neil's phone is glued to him practically all day, an exasperated but loving Charlie constantly asking why, because "You've got it memorized, Perry, relax a little." Of course, that fact doesn't stop him from rehearsing with anyone who will spare a second.

"Meeks! Before we head to Brenner's, do you mind just-"

"Neil. If you make me listen to you singing "I'm Alive" one more time I will fucking scream."

Meeks isn't one to snap, so that shuts him up pretty quickly.

"Todd- run my monolouge with me?"

"Neil, I think you know it."

"Just one more time!"

Todd has a harder time saying "no" than the others do.

Still, as soon as classes have ended, they all gather by the entrance to wish Neil luck, with Pitts reminding him to get dinner before he comes back. This earns him an eyeroll and a "Thanks, Mom".

"Before I go!" Neil exclaims. "I don't want an answer now, just while

I'm gone... Food for thought. I think we should start the Poets meetings started again. And I know-" He adds as their faces change, "It's risky, or whatever. But I say Carpe Diem. And I think you guys should too." He pulls the book from his bag, handing it to Charlie.

"Food for thought?" Charlie asks.

"Yep. Though I've got a few choices ready if we want to meet tonight," He grins.

The boys shake their heads, amused.

Knox smiles. "Get going before you're late, thespian."

Neil gives him a wink, accompanied by jazz hands.

"Break a leg."

"I plan to."

~~~

"Neil, shut up."

"I just can't believe myself!" He groans, hand pulling at his hair. " 'I am your deepest nightmare too'. The line was 'darkest'! 'Darkest', Gin! How'd I forget that?"

Ginny smirks, giving him a light swat. "You're lucky you're cute or I would so not be your friend."

"You so would."

"You're annoying."

"Give me some sympathy! I just completely screwed up an audition."

Ginny shakes her head. "It was ONE word. Literally no one noticed."

"I knew I should've practiced more."

"Neil. Darling. Love of my life. If you don't stop, I'm going to slap you."

He looks at her a moment, concluding she's serious. "Fiiine." He smiles. "You rocked it though."
~~~

She shakes her head. "I fumbled my monolouge."

"You recovered well, though!"

"I still fumbled it."

"You're too hard on yourself."

"You're one to talk!"

He smirks cheekily. "I know."

"Jerk," She swats him, and Neil stumbles back. Ginny cackles.

"You're so mean!"

"Mhm." They stop at the Welton doors. "Hey, tell me how your weird cave cult thing goes."

"Sure thing. Tell me how it goes with your... Girlfriend..."

Ginny blushes bright red. "My what?"

Neil points a finger at his neck, and Ginny pats at the spot on hers, drawing away lipstick.

"Or maybe it's a guy. Or someone nonbinary. I don't judge."

"It's a girl," She mutters.

"Knew it. It's Chris, right?"

"No!" She flushes darker.

Neil beams. "I knew it!".

"Dick," She mumbles, smiling slightly.

"Alright. Now go on back to your- did I mention this yet- girlfriend."

"I will. And you go back and tell your- how do I put this- boyfriend- that you killed your audition."

Neil's smile fades a bit. "Right. Call you later?"

"For sure."

They hug, and Neil heads in, only to be immediately ambushed by the

guys.

"How'd it go?"

"You get the part?"

"They don't tell you yet, Charlie."

"Shut it, dick."

"Did you remember to eat?"

"How'd you do?"

"Guys, let him talk!"

Neil can't help but laugh. "It went pretty good, I think. I messed up a line."

"Oh hush, I'm sure you did great!"

He smiles.

Knox elbows Charlie. "Are you going to tell him?"

"I thought I'd let him squirm a bit."

"Wait, tell me what?"

Silence.

He rolls his eyes. "Tell me what?"

Charlie smirks, tossing Five Centuries Of Verse into his hands. "Start planning for Friday."

Neil opens the book, looking up at the guys.

He grins.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello all! I'm officially off from school until April 15th, so I'm going to try and get as much writing done for this as I can (as well as a few other dps fics I've been writing on the side 👀)
>
> Also, just wanted to say I know this virus stuff can be freaky, but it's going to be okay. I'd highly recommend looking at pictures of

cute animals if you need a distraction. Make sure y'all are taking care of yourselves best as u can, and my dms are always open if u need to vent 💕

As always, hope u guys have a lovely day !

To Whatever's Coming Our Way

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: briefly implied child abuse, referenced animal cruelty, referenced suicide attempt, and self harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you were to ask current Neil what his father doesn't know about, he could give you a list. It's a wild list, with at least 30 things on it, and his father doesn't have a clue.

All of his friends know this. However, a common misconception they all share is the idea this is a recent development. Neil's been hiding things from his father for years.

One of the first things he ever did behind his father's back, in fact, was sneaking out of the house. He was planning to meet up with Charlie so they could watch the stars together.

They were clutching each other's hands so tight they could hardly breathe, both terrified of getting caught, but there was an undeniable thrill and excitement that came with it.

Charlie hadn't known anything about stars or constellations, but it was okay, because Neil knew lots and was more than happy to share.

It's the story of Orion that really gets Charlie excited. He grabs Neil, pulls him up from the ground, and declares (through a very excited whisper) that he is going to be just like Orion when he grows up, because Orion is his new favorite constellation.

Charlie asks which one is Neil's favorite, and he readily says the 7 Sisters, because it's the first one his mom taught him.

"We used to come out here every night," He says hesitantly, likes it's all one big secret, "And we'd look at the stars together. Just her and me. And she'd teach me all their names and stories and how to find where they are." He looks at Charlie. "But now I have school. She and Dad don't like me staying out late. But I still remember." He smiles proudly. "I still remember all of them."

"I'm gonna remember them too," Charlie promises. "I wish my mom did stuff like that with me."

"She doesn't? What about when you were little?"

He shakes his head. "She doesn't like going out much. And my dad would say stuff like this is stupid."

"I don't like your dad," Neil confesses. "He always seems so mad when he picks you up."

"Can I tell you a secret?" Charlie looks down. "I don't like him either. Not really. But you can't tell."

"I won't. I swear."

"Still," He continues, "I wish either of them wanted to do something with me. I mean, sometimes James lets me play Pokemon with him, but he hasn't in a while. He says he's too busy with school. It's just... My family never does stuff together. We don't have traditions, or- or anything like that." He crumbles.

Neil grabs his hands, pulling him into a hug. "Well, this'll be ours."

Charlie pulls away, looking at him, and Neil smiles confidently. "We meet here. Once a week. Sneak out at night. And I'll teach you all the stars, and you can teach me all the Pokemon."

"You mean it?"

"Course I do."

And they do. They keep their tradition up for years and years. As a result, Neil becomes pretty damn good at sneaking out.

Still, no matter how many times he does it, he always gets the same flurry of nervousness and mischief.

"You got the book?" Knox mouths.

Neil gives him a thumbs up.

Knox nods, pulling the black hood of his coat over his head.

They start walking, Pitts dropping treats for the dog and giving her a quick scratch under her chin before continuing.

Soon, they're running through the forest. It's magical and familiar and it feels like he's home again. As they enter the cave, a strong breeze blows past, and Neil stops to soak it in. Charlie grins at him, well-

versed in his friend's quirks and antics.

They duck inside, Neil taking his spot in the center, right next to The God Of The Cave. He slowly pulls the book open, forcing the others to savor the moment. He can tell they're loving the drama just as much as him.

"I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. To put to rout all that was not life, and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not yet lived."

Knox raises his flashlight. "Cheers to that."

The boys follow, the lights flickering on and off.

"Alright, alright. We need some reading. Lads?" Neil waits for someone to respond.

They just stare, before Pitts laughs. "Get on with it, Perry. We know you've got something."

"Now, I have no idea what you mean, Pittsie. I would never, ever-" He slides the paper out of his pocket with a smile- "Keep you guys waiting."

Meeks leads the group in a drumroll, and Cameron, after a moment of hesitation, flicks his flashlight on, turning it to Neil like a spotlight.

"Alright, alright, settle down." They quiet. Neil clears his throat. "The Two-Headed Calf, by Laura Gilpin:

Tomorrow,
When the farm boys find this freak of nature,
They will wrap his body in newspaper,
And carry him to the museum.

But tonight, he is alive,
And in the north field with his mother.
It is a perfect summer evening:
The moon rising over the orchard,
The wind in the grass.
And as he stares into the sky,
He sees twice as many stars as usual."

Neil sits, letting his friends absorb the poem. After a moment, Charlie

whistles. Knox stands, lifting a book. "My go?"

By the time they finish up, it's a little after 2AM. It's late. Or early, rather. They should've been back ages ago. Still, there's an undeniable longing in their eyes as they look back towards the exit of the cave. Even Cameron seems to have a hard time making his feet move.

Once they're back at Welton, they move to part ways, when out of nowhere, Knox pulls Neil into a tight hug.

"Knox?"

He speaks into his ear, quietly. "I just... I guess I thought... It's good to hear you reading stuff. I didn't know if last time was our..." He pulls away, wiping at an eye. "Just... I'm glad you're still here."

Neil's at a loss for words, for a moment. He smiles smally, bumping their shoulders. "Thanks."

Knox smiles brightly, eyes shining. For the first time, Neil really stops to consider what would've happened. Knox, emotional, expressive, wears-his-heart-on-his-sleeve Knox. He would've been devastated. He would've been lost. Something shifts in his stomach, uncomfortable.

Knox bumps their shoulders back, and Neil winces a bit. Knox hit the new scar. His stomach shifts again. Guilt.

Knox turns to leave, and without thinking, Neil's hand is reaching out and grabbing Knox's shoulder. Knox looks at him, questioning.

He speaks lowly, ensuring no one else can here. "Would you have cared? If I..."

Knox won't bullshit him, Neil's sure. He might try, but he's a terrible liar. Neil's known him since they were little. He'll be able to tell.

Knox, for his part, looks at Neil with such a genuinely confused expression that Neil squirms a bit under it. "Of course I would've."

It's the truth. Neil, for all his paranoia and self-hatred, couldn't convince himself it's a lie, even if he tried.

Knox looks at him a moment, before slowly, deliberately, pulling Neil into another hug.

"I'm still cutting," Neil whispers. His eyes clench shut, shame clogging his throat. His entire body tenses, waiting for the reply.

Knox cups the back of his head, fingers threaded through his hair. He looks at him softly, not saying a word. Then, his eyes dart over, towards Charlie. His eyebrows raise, questioning.

Neil swallows roughly and nods.

Knox smiles, the same small-but-comforting reassurance. "Go on, then." He walks away, beckoning Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron to follow him. Only Charlie and Todd stay back.

Neil droops a bit, pulling his messenger bag off his shoulder and handing it over to Charlie.

Charlie stares at him, lost.

"I lied."

Charlie's face falls, still confused, but now worried. He opens the bag, pulling out the books from the meeting. More school supplies follow, a few odds and ends, his phone, and then, a small, black bag. Neil looks down.

Charlie unzips it and peers inside.

"Oh."

He pulls the small pack of razor blades out.

"That night... I lied- I snuck out when you were asleep, I... I took the money back. Not all of it, just- but some. And then, the next morning- And I've been feeling guilty, really guilty, and I'm sorry."

It's silent. Then, Todd speaks up.

"Why?"

Neil's hands ball into fists. "I felt like I needed it."

"No." Todd shakes his head. "Why are you telling us?"

Neil turns to him, eyes glassy. "I don't..."

They wait.

"I don't want to live like this anymore."

Todd nods.

Charlie sets the pack of blades down, and hands the rest of Neil's things back to him. He's disappointed, obviously so, but there's a certain amount of pride in his eyes when he looks up at Neil. "This is a good step, Neily. Really."

He hugs him, just a moment, and leaves.

Neil wraps his arms around himself, turning back to Todd.

"You're really trying, aren't you?" Todd murmurs.

"Trying," Neil confirms. "But I... I can't promise you anything more than that."

Todd shakes his head, determined. "Trying is all I need."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Todd cups his cheek, and kisses him. Neil eyes flutter shut, gently kissing back. Todd pulls back, watching him carefully.

"I want to be with you. But I need you to be honest with me. Okay?"

Neil nods. "Okay."

Todd takes a deep breath. Lets it out. Holds Neil's hand. "Okay."

Neil looks at him, worn and exhausted, but there's a fondness in his eyes. "We should go upstairs. Get some sleep."

Todd hums. "My thoughts exactly."

Neil gives his hand a gentle squeeze, and off they go.

Chapter End Notes

> Hoo boy,,, and thus ends what I consider 'Act One' in my outline (yes this fic has an outline and yes it's like 20 pages, what of it?) I'm not gonna go on hiatus or anything like that, just figured I'd say in case anyone is curious as to where we're at storywise.
>
> On the plus, Anderperry is back and Neil is taking yet another good step! I was feeling,,, so many feelings,,, while writing this. No clue if it shows lmao. But yea- at this rate I should have another chap up soon !!

As always, hope y'all enjoyed and thank u so so much to everyone commenting, kudosing, bookmarking, and beyond! We're over 1,000 hits which is like,,, lit rally insane. Ty to everyone for reading, u guys make my day 💕

I Will Stand In The Dark For You

Chapter Notes

> In which we visit a few perspectives we haven't seen much of yet.
> ❦❦❦❦
>
> Warnings for: mentioned suicide, overworking, heavy spiraling thoughts, self harm, insults, and a mention of thr*wing up. ALSO:
>
> Neil reads a very, very heavy poem in this chapter. It's towards the very end, during Cameron's point of view, if you need to skip. The poem contains: suicidal thoughts, self harm, pretty graphic body horror, and general dark themes. It's hard for even me to read, so please be careful and skip if you need to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the next meeting, Neil reads the introduction, as per usual. What's unusual is him taking a seat immediately after. Charlie goes ahead, not having any problems reading something, but afterwards, Neil's still sitting.

Knox has a half a mind to be worried, until he sees Neil and Todd sneak a kiss. He adds up the lack of romantic gushing between them, and how happy they look today, and figures they must have had a discussion at some point. Now, they're back to normal, and Knox decides that's a pretty good excuse for neither of them to be reading anything.

Of course, he didn't really expect the trend to continue throughout the next two meetings they hold. But, hey, if they're happy, he supposes it's really none of his business.

And they DO seem happy. People have called Knox naive more times than he can count. He's also been called gullible and too trusting, but he doesn't care all that much.

He trusts that Neil can take care of himself. Trusts that Neil will tell someone if he can't. Maybe it makes him stupid, or naive, but Neil seems happy. So, Knox decides to trust it.

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Neil seems happy. Really happy.
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Meeks doesn't trust it.

It's not that he doesn't trust his friends, really, it isn't. It's more the fact that he's not an idiot. None of them are. Neil did a damn good job of hiding for what must have been years. Until... The play. He couldn't hide all that.

Now, Meeks is on guard. His friend is alive, thank God, but Meeks doesn't plan on taking that chance again.

He's not the best with emotions, he knows. He's pretty damn awkward in most social situations, he can be slow on the uptake, and he says weird things that he doesn't realize are weird until after he's said them. He's not the type to see a friend in distress and whisper soft assurances that he doesn't even believe are true, because he's not good with emotions.

What Meeks is good at is research.

Now, you have to be smart to get into Welton. (That, or have mega rich parents). Neil is an Ivy League boy. Cameron is a textbook teacher's pet. Even Charlie's a damn math wiz. But no one researches like Steven Meeks. His papers are always well-done, as are his friends' papers, since he usually ends up helping them, but his researching skills go beyond school.

It's fun for him. It's fun for Pitts too, which is amazing, because now he has a partner in basically every dumb project. Pitts isn't always good with numbers, and Meeks isn't always good with ideas, so they work perfectly.

But this time, research isn't about schoolwork or fun. It's about one of his best friends. He starts with suicide, which leads him down a rabbit hole of everything from low self esteem to mental illness and everything else that comes with it. He ends up making an entire notebook dedicated to the matter, and writes down anything that seems like it could help.

Meeks gets absorbed in doing it, so much so that Pitts has to practically beg him to take a break to eat something and get some sleep. It's then that he realizes he's been working for 8 hours straight. This kind of thing happens a lot for him.

But it doesn't matter, because he's got somewhere to start, at the very least. Tomorrow, he can start talking to Neil and see what helps. He's sure of it.

And if Meeks holds Pitts a little tighter that night, well, Pitts is kind enough not to acknowledge it.

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Pitts doesn't usually address things. Not because he's the repression type, or anything like that. He's perfectly in touch with his emotions. It's just that he never really has to bring things up. Things get brought up to him.

He's aware that he's in a weird position in the group. He's funny, but Charlie is funnier. He's smart, but Meeks is smarter. He's quiet, but Todd is quieter. But honestly? He doesn't mind. Pitts knows his friends like him, trust him, enjoy spending time with him, so he doesn't really need a label. After all, it isn't The Breakfast Club.

He's as secure of his role in the group as he is in his emotions, and Pitts wonders if his security is the reason his friends seem to flock towards him in crisis. He doesn't mind it at all, he likes it when he can offer help.

So, he keeps a close, careful eye on Neil. And when he notices him having a bad day, he mentions something about finishing his homework and having too much free time after class. He doesn't invite Neil to come over, or say that he needs to. He leaves the offer, and waits, confident that if Neil needs to talk to him, he'll come and find him.

And eventually, he does.

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Neil's skin is crawling. Specifically, a small patch of skin on the top of his left thigh. It itches. Really, really itches.

That's because there's a scar there, because Neil tries not to do That in places where people might see. He is referring to It as That in his mind, because he really wants to do It again, and the more he thinks about That Thing, the more he wants to do It.

Honestly, he's not even having a bad day. Things have been going well. Or at least, as well as they ever are. He would have no desire to do That, if it weren't for the fact that a certain Scar of his is extremely itchy, and it is really fucking hard not to think of That when there's a
~~~

very annoying reminder of It that he can't escape.

Neil wants to just scratch the Scar, really he does, but then he runs the risk of reopening the Scar and then he's going to see Blood and he's going to start thinking about all the Blood that comes when you do It and then he's back to wanting to do It again.

He's been clean for almost a week. That's almost nothing, he thinks, but he knows he's wrong. That's impressive, for him. He doesn't want the streak to end yet. He hasn't had strong Urges to do It, and when he does, he ignores Them. And he'd be ignoring the Urge now, but his Fucking. Thigh. Itches. And He's On The Verge Of Crying, Which Is Dumb, Right? It's Just An Itch. It's Just An Itch, But He Really. Doesn't. Like It.

His hand is shaking. That's probably not good, he thinks, he should probably do something about that, but what he really wants to do something about is this fucking ITCH.

Neil knows what to do here. He knows, he knows, he knows. He needs to tell someone. Who does he tell? Todd is in town. Charlie is at rowing practice.

But this is fine. He's Neil Perry 2.0, the latest model that totally knows how to cope with wanting to Cut Himself and oh, fuck, he used the word, and look at that! The URGE has officially increased tenfold! Wonderful! Okay, now both his hands are SHAKING, he definitely needs to find someone before he does Something He Regrets.

He's Spiraling Really Badly, he recognizes. He Needs to find Someone. Todd and Charlie are both gone, but that's Fine, he has other friends. He steps outside of the room, and is Immediately OVERw he l me d. But he's Got This, he is Coping. He can walk over to Meeks and Pitts, he Knows where their room is, he can find them. They can help. Maybe Pitts will be free. Maybe. Maybe maybe maybe but it's worth a shot and GODDAMMIT This Fucking Scar Is Going To KILL Him.

He knocks on the door, at least he assumes he does- he Doesn't Know How, because his hand is literally Shaking So Bad, but Pitts Opens The Door A N D he's okay.

he's neil perry 2.0. he's coping. pitts Has to see that he's coping.

he hides his shaking hands behind his back and breathes and says, "hey, can i come in?" does his voice sound normal? he thinks his voice sounds normal. he thinks maybe he's selling it.

"Sure thing." Pitts opens the door wider, and Neil trails in. He notices Meeks isn't there.

good. it's going to be a lot easier to fool just one person.

"Are you okay? You're shaking."

welp, there goes That Plan.

Pitts gestures to the bed, and waits until Neil sits before asking, "What's up?"

and neil debates just saying, "it's Nothing, he's F I N E, does a guy need an excuse to see his Friend, and the Only Reason he's s h a k i n g is because his damn heater is broken again, but then pitts puts a Hand on his Shoulder, and some of The ITCH goes away, so he settles for telling pitts the truth.

"One of my scars really itches and I can't stop thinking about it and I've been trying to ignore it all day and it's not working and honestly, man? I just really need a fucking hug."

it takes him a minute to realize he just told pitts Everything, but then that realization is gone, because Pitts pulls him into a hug (wow he forgot how good Pitts was at giving hugs- probably because he's so tall), and the minute he does, the fog in Neil's head starts to clear.

"I mean, I'm always here if you need that. We all are, you know?"

For a moment, Neil's just breathing in and out. Trying not to do so too quickly. Then, the question registers in his mind, and he nods.

"Better?" Pitts asks.

Neil closes his eyes, sinking deeper into his arms. He's so glad his friends got past a majority of that toxic masculinity bullshit freshman year. Fuck that. Hugs are amazing. He's beginning to suspect the world would be infinitely better if friends hugged friends more.

"Neil?"

What? Did he miss something?

"Better?"

Oh, right. "Mhm." He tenses a bit, waits for Pitts to move.

He doesn't.

Neil settles again.

They stay there a minute while Neil recharges, putting a hand on his stomach and breathing out and in, like Todd does sometimes.

"Can I recite a poem for you?"

Neil looks up at Pitts curiously.

"I'm thinking about reading it at the next meeting." He smiles. "I'd love to get an opinion."

"Okay."

Then, the small smile on Pitts' face morphs into a shit-eating smirk that just might put Charlie's to shame.

"I would not, could not, in a box. I would not, could not, with a fox. I will not eat them with a mouse. I will not eat them in a house. I will not eat them here or there. I will not eat them anywhere. I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-Am."

Neil laughs so hard he almost chokes, and the minute the laughter slips out, he and Pitts both breathe a sigh of relief that he's back.

"Why- the FUCK-" Neil manages to wheeze out, "Do you have that memorized?"

Pitts looks him in the eyes, and says, so seriously, "I'm a Dead Poet."

And Neil loses it again. He forgets about the itch for a long while after that, but Pitts doesn't.

In fact, when Meeks comes in that evening, Pitts asks if Meeks will hold him.

It's a rare request, because Pitts is so tall, and Meeks isn't, but he obliges. And as they settle into bed, Meeks tucks a strand of hair behind Pitts' ear and kisses the edge of his jaw.

"Tell me what's wrong?"

Pitts grabs one of Meeks' hands. Kisses the knuckles. Sighs.

"I'm so worried about Neil."

Meeks runs his thumb over the palm of Pitts' hand, glancing over towards his notebook. "I am too."

And that's that.

~~~

Admittedly, Cameron's at a bit of a loss here. He was lost when a sobbing Charlie came back into their room from sneaking out to find Neil, and he's been pretty lost ever since.

Normally, when he's lost, he asks for advice. A teacher, one of his parents- someone like that. But Neil's made it clear that telling them about what's been going on is a display of trust. Neil's trusting them not to tell anyone, and even though Cameron is lost, he's sure not breaking Neil's trust is a good place to start.

Honestly? Cameron's trying not to think about it, though that's pretty hard when everytime your roommate comes in, you end up with a painful reminder.

Some days, Charlie will do some kind of half-hearted teasing towards him, and when Cameron replies with one of his own, Charlie will practically crumble. Other days, Charlie fires so many insults- not teasing, much nastier- that Cameron can't keep up with retorting if he tried. So, he sits there and takes it.

It hurts, sure, but he's pretty damn sure that Charlie's hurting more. Normally, he wouldn't just lie back and take this. Normally, he'd report him to Hager or something like that. Normally, he'd want to punch Charlie Dalton in his stupid, smirking face. But nothing about this situation is normal. Nothing at all.

He's always taken pride in knowing what to do, no matter the situation. So having his world turned upside down and finding himself completely out of his element? It changes him.

He starts acting a bit harsher, he realizes. But even with Neil "back to to normal", everything feels different. Cameron knows the Poets are his friends, but it always seemed like Neil was the only one who have a damn if Cameron sat with them or not. Just like he did when Pitts first came, just like he's been doing with Todd.

And the knowledge that Neil tries so hard to help all of them, but they have no idea how to help Neil? It's awful.
~~~

So, when Neil decides to read something at the next meeting, for a moment, he's hopeful. Maybe this means things are getting back to how they were before.

He's wrong.

As Neil stands, there's a clear hesitance in his eyes. He brings up a small piece of paper, rather than one of his usual worn library books, and says, "This piece is a bit different than what I normally share, I think, but I really... Well, 'like' isn't the right word. But I think it's good. And I think it's an important thing to write about, and read, maybe. And yeah. It's not old either, it's-it's new. New-ish. And I'm not reading all of it, just... The back half." He stares at them blankly. "I'm just going to read it. Uh, this is "I Kill Myself For Days At A Time, Now You Can Too" by Dylan Sanders."

Cameron certain they all feel the same sense of growing horror, but Neil just unfolds the paper, and begins.

"Sometimes, I forget what's typing my keys
Are they fingers or are they bones?
Canvassed by skin
Patchwork of sights, sounds
Nerves restitched to new brain
Craft myself in new places, old skin falls away
And my fingers ache, pop, bruise
Because yes, they are fingers, I can see now
They do not look as mine did
What were my fingers before?

Do you remember the texture?
Do you remember the taste that stained your tongue?

So, I detach them slowly
Twist left at the knuckle, dislocate, slide from hand made tomb
Small incisions around the base to release
No meat, only bones, so light and- is fluffy the correct word?

Lay them on the table in rows
A lot less effort, suicide
But no
Because I'd rather waste away with time
Greater punishment, greater experience

Eroding into ether a skin cell at a time
Painting over my existence in narrow strokes

Pen lines bolded double strikethrough my name

The importance is in me
Perpetual unhappiness, unavoidable doubtless
I can be happy still, so I try."

He finishes, looking up at the group hesitantly. It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

"It was great, Neil..." Meeks speaks evenly, but Cameron can see his hands shake.

Neil sits, clearly already regretting the poem, and Cameron just can't handle it. He gets up and walks out of the cave. He breathes once- he doesn't know how to handle this- twice- he doesn't know how to handle this- and then he throws up.

Neil comes out, running over when he sees Cameron throwing up. "Shit! Are you okay?"

Cameron looks up at him, eyes wide. "Are you?"

Neil falters. "I'm sorry. I didn't think..."

"Well, maybe you should've, Neil." He's breathing heavily, unable to get the words out of his head.

"It's just a poem."

Cameron breathes in- he needs to calm down- breathes out- he needs to keep it together- and nods.

"Right. You're right. Sorry."

"It's... Fine." Neil offers a hand, and Cameron takes it. They walk back in, and Charlie's already started reading something else. Good. He doesn't want to dwell on this.

He never wants to think about this again.

Chapter End Notes

> There we go! Bit of a longer chapter, bc I'm trying to start increasing my chapter lengths a bit! I really enjoyed getting into the perspectives of the different characters, so hopefully you all enjoyed too

Next chapter will be a bit of a companion piece/part 2 to this one, and then we'll be back into the flow of things!

I Don't Wanna Be Funny Anymore

Chapter Notes

> Now that we've seen how much Neil relies on people, we explore how much people rely on Neil.
>
> Warnings for: Financial issues, one mention of physical abuse, panic attacks, lying, negative self-talk, implied eating disorders, implied talk of suicide, referenced self harm, emotional abuse/ neglect, and generally crappy parenting.
>
> There's also a general emphasis on Neil's lack of taking care of himself, emotional repression, and unhealthy thought processes.
>
> As always, stay safe guys

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some days, a young Neil learns, his mom doesn't like to cook or clean or fold clothes, or even get out of bed. Neil asks her if she gets sick a lot, and she says it's "something like that". His dad calls them "episodes". She calls them "quiet days". Neil doesn't really understand what either of those things mean, so Neil just calls it a sick day.

Sick days, his dad has taught him, means putting away the silverware AND the other dishes (even though that isn't part of his chores). Sick days means making himself something small for lunch, like a peanut butter sandwich, while his dad tries to get an extra shift at work that day.

When he's really little, (and his father doesn't have any shifts, and the sick days happen a lot more often) sick days mean Neil needs to visit the neighbors and see if their dogs need walking or things like that. Mr. Carson, who's very nice and has a strong handshake, always asks Neil to pick up sticks around the front lawn so that later when he mowes, the mower doesn't get jammed.

He gets paid a cent per stick, which his father says is good, but Neil can see it's not enough, so he starts snapping the sticks he finds into smaller pieces so he gets paid more. Neil's dad finds out pretty quickly, and smacks him for it. Neil cries really hard, because his dad can yell a lot, but he never hits. His dad apologizes, but tells him their family is not that desperate for money. It confuses Neil, because if they don't need money badly, why is his dad always telling him he has

to be a doctor because of how well it pays?

His dad also tells him to never, ever be dishonest like that again. This also confuses him, because both his parents seem to really like it when he's dishonest. Like when his mom comes home from work late, and she's really tired, and she asks if his dad made him supper already. Neil lies and says yes, even though his dad never makes supper. He goes to sleep pretty hungry, but after it's happened a few times, it doesn't really bother him too much anymore. More importantly, it makes his mom relieved and happy.

Neil's parents don't seem happy very often, so he likes to make them happy whenever he can.

He's good at figuring out how to make them happy, too. When his dad is upset, he does extra reading from one of the big medicine books in his room and lists off what he's learned. When mom is upset, he makes her a snack or gets the laundry out of the dryer. What makes them happiest, though, is simply when Neil's happy.

It makes sense. After all, Neil likes being happy better than being sad anyway. The only problem is no matter how hard he tries, he always ends up mad, or sad, or scared. So, even though his mom and dad always tell him it's important to be honest, he pretends to be super happy anyway. His parents like it better that way, and if he pretends really well, he can convince himself he's happy, and he likes it better that way too.

The habit continues when he meets Charlie, his best friend ever. Charlie's really happy too, or at least that's how it seems at first, but the more Neil gets to know him, the sadder his best friend seems. Well, Neil decides, that's okay. He can be extra happy for the both of them. The same logic from his parents holds true. Charlie's always happier if Neil's happy.

Does it get tiring sometimes? Sure. Especially when he enters middle school, and his friend group gets bigger than just him and Charlie. Not to mention high school. It's worth it, though, because Neil loves being the happy one.

He knows what will make each of his friends smile most. He knows what joke to tell, what activity to suggest, what story to dramatically act out. He has the power to make his friends less mad, or sad, or scared, even if it's only for a minute.

After the night of the play, this routine gets a bit more... Complicated.

Now his friends know he isn't always happy. Still, he keeps hope. After all, he convinced his father this was some one-off accident. Maybe the same is true for his friends. And, it ends up that way- that, or they just forget about what happened. Neil doesn't care either way. As long as he still gets to be the happy one.

And he does.

~~~

Neil comes back into the room after showering and is immediately at attention. Todd, rather than fixing his hair or writing like he usually is around Sunday morning, is curled up on the floor, wedged between the heater and his bed. Neil's crouching on the ground in a heartbeat.

"Todd?" He murmurs it quietly, knowing better than to talk loudly when Todd gets like this.

Todd shakes his head, eyes squeezed shut. His breathing is coming in quick and ragged.

"Just me, love. Just me." Neil reaches out a hand, then hesitates. "Can I touch you?"

"I- I don't know." His voice is low and hoarse, and he winces as he says it. Neil can practically hear Todd getting frustrated with himself. His breathing gets quicker, and he forces out, "Need you. Please."

Neil grabs one of Todd's hand, moving it to his own chest. "Okay. Just make your heartbeat match mine, okay? There's no rush. It's just you and me, babe."

Todd eyes shut tighter, desperately trying to focus. Neil rubs a thumb over Todd's hand. "Just me, Todd. Just me. It's okay."

Todd lets out a small whimper, and Neil takes a slow, purposeful breath. He waits a minute, then repeats. Todd does it with him.

Neil smiles, softly encouraging. "That's good, Todd. That's perfect. Just like that." Giving his hand a gentle squeeze, they take another breath. "Good," He says again.

They continue until they're in sync, Todd and Neil breathing in and out on the same heartbeat. Todd's eyes slowly open, looking up at Neil. "Sorry," He mumbles.
~~~

Neil shakes his head slightly. "Don't be. You okay?"

"I..." He swallows roughly. "I don't know."

"Okay. That's okay." Todd gives a wet laugh, and Neil cups his cheek. "Hey. That's okay."

"Right. Right." He sighs, a light sob coming out with it. "Sorry."

"It's okay. What do you need?"

He looks up at him. "You?"

Neil scoots forward, wrapping an arm around him. Todd leans against him, head against Neil's collarbone. He takes a long, shaky breath. Neil just raises a hand to his back, gently rubbing it.

They're quiet for a few minutes. Without lifting his head, Todd whispers, "Neil?"

He keeps rubbing. "Yeah?"

"Can you... talk?"

"Sure, baby. What about?"

He grabs at the edge of Neil's sweater. "Anything."

"Did l ever tell you about the time I saved my neighbor's business?"

He shakes his head.

Neil begins speaking, voice still low. By the time he's reaching the end, Todd's body is limp against him.

"And then the bakery reopened- with a special pie named after me."

Todd hums. "Neil, love?"

"Hm?"

"Did that really happen?"

Neil's quiet a moment. "No. No, I just made it up as I went along."

Todd lets out a laugh, and Neil can't help but giggle along with him.

"You're good at making up stories, then."

"You're just rubbing off on me," Neil insists.

Todd smiles, snuggling closer into him. "Maybe."

Neil kisses the top of his head.

It's not a good day.

Neil doesn't know why, but it just isn't. When he woke up, he got the familiar, sinking feeling, and Todd's anxieties seem to confirm the suspicion. Neil has no time to dwell in his own bad feeling, however, because Todd isn't the only one having a rough start to their morning.

Todd goes to the library, checking to see if someone is still borrowing The Bell Jar, and Neil's phone buzzes. It's from Knox.

'do you have a minute? need advice lol'

That gets Neil on his feet. Knox never actually texts 'lol' unless he's trying to make something seem less serious than it is.

'What's up?'

'my room? nbd if you can't btw'

'I'll be there in a sec'

Neil doesn't have to say a word. The minute he closes the door behind him, Knox is rambling frantically that "holy shit, I think I like Charlie. Like, LIKE Charlie!"

Neil spends about an hour with him, coaxing him to relax and trying to get his mind off it. By the time he's finished up, Knox seems to be feeling a bit better, which is Neil is glad for.

He heads down to the dining hall to get lunch early, when he runs into Pitts, who practically begs him for help. Apparently, he's accidentally deleted the file for his History project, and Meeks is visiting his moms for the weekend, and it's due Monday, "and I don't understand this stuff at ALL, Neil, but you were studying the other day, right?"

It's really not a big deal. He'll have a big dinner. And Pitts is so, so happy once Neil's helped him bang out 8,000 words. It took a few hours, so he's tired, but he's happy. And he only gets happier when his phone pings, telling him he's got an email.

The minute he opens it and reads through, he feels like he could cry.

'Rehearshals start in a week, and again, we're excited to have you playing Moritz!'

He's in. He's IN. He swipes open his contacts, excited to call Ginny, but she beats him to it.

"Gin! Did you get it?"

"I'm Ilse," The reply comes.

"Yes! Yes! I just got the email! You're looking at Moritz Stiefel. Well, not looking, but- Rehearsals are in a week! Can you believe that? I've been reading through the script, of course, good to get a head start, but still. One week! Do you want to meet at Henley, say 5-ish? We can walk together."

"Yeah. That sounds good." Her voice is quiet. Detached.

"Ginny?"

"I'm sorry. I'm being dumb."

"What is it?"

"Ilse. I tried out for Wendla."

It comes back in a flash, and Neil feels like an idiot. Stupid. Stupid!

"Oh..."

"I'm being dumb, right? I mean, I got a part. And Ilse's a really good character, and she and Moritz have that whole scene together, so that'll be really fun..."

"I'm really sorry."

"No, it's fine. It's fine."

Neil bites his lip. "Ginny?"

And then he's at it again. By the time he gets off the phone with her, it's well-past dinner, which is no biggie. He's not super hungry anyway, and honestly, how much of a dick does he have to be to forget who Ginny auditioned for? He was selfish, got carried away thinking about himself. So he shouldn't really eat, and it doesn't

matter, because he's not hungry, because he's just TIRED.

He's been helping his friends all day it feels like, even though he knows he's being dramatic and all of them together probably wasn't even an hour. Besides, it's not a big deal, because they're happy, so he's happy. And he really is. Tired, but happy.

He's so tired he doesn't even want to bother giving the guys the big news. He'll just tell them about the show tomorrow. He enters his room, debating telling Todd for a second, but then he remembers that morning. Todd was worried about Neil being in a show when he first suggested it, and Todd doesn't need anything else to worry about today.

Instead, he settles into bed, spooning Todd because even though he seems fine now, Neil's still worried.

"Neil?" Todd mumbles from behind Neil's chest.

"Hm?"

"You'll tell me if you're feeling that bad again, won't you?"

Still wrapped around him, Neil tenses.

"Or at least someone, right?" Todd looks down. "I know you don't believe it, but we all care about you so much. And they- we- I can't do this without you."

"Todd..." He doesn't want to do this right now. He's TIRED. He doesn't want to do this.

"I really can't. And I-I don't care if it's selfish. I need you."

Neil looks down. "I know. I need you too."

"This isn't healthy, is it?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe I don't care if it's healthy," Todd says, fists clenched tightly to hide his trembling hands. "It's true. I need you. You- you can't do that to me again."

"I'm trying," Neil says honestly.

Todd sighs. "I know."

Neil reaches out and grabs Todd's hand. "I'm not going try it again. I promise."

"You can't possibly promise something like that."

"I'm doing it now."

"Neil..."

"I'm serious," Neil insists, with no idea of whether or not he's telling the truth. All he knows is he can't stand that look on Todd's face. "Never again. I was... I was scared, and- and desperate, and I wasn't thinking. It won't happen again. I'm happy. I'm really, really happy."

Todd looks at him, a sad smile on his face. "You're lying," He says. "You can fool yourself all you want. But not me."

Neil frowns. "I'm happy," He repeats.

"If you were really happy, you wouldn't be doing this to yourself."

"Doing what? Trying out for a show I'm passionate about? Combing through the library's poetry section for something to read at the next DPS meeting? Binging crappy soap operas with Charlie and cuddling with you? What exactly am I 'doing to' myself?"

Todd gives him a hard look. "Scratching your arms until they almost bleed. Staying up late every night to study things you already know. Punishing yourself for every little thing you think you've done." He pauses, before adding. "Lying to all of us when we ask if you're okay."

Neil scowls, defensive. "So, I'm not perfectly happy. That doesn't mean I'm sad."

"No, it doesn't."

"I don't know what I am."

Todd searches his face. "You're... You're Neil."

He scoffs, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "No idea who that is. All I know is I'm sick of being him."

"I like him quite a bit," Todd says simply.

"Why?"

"I like how he's always ready to cheer up his friends when they're down. I like how he takes initiative and gets them to try new things. I like how he manages to smile, even when things get hard. How he'd do anything for someone else. I like that Neil."

Neil deflates. "I know."

He doesn't have the heart to tell Todd that's precisely the problem.

Chapter End Notes

Dead Poets Society? More like Co-Dependent Poets Society amirite?

I swear I've got some lighter chapters coming up for y'all, but on the bright side, Spring Awakening is officially happening! Shoutout to everyone that correctly guessed Neil as Moritz and Ginny as Ilse (we'll be exploring that soon). Again, those of you that don't know the show: no worries. I'll try n give any needed exposition within chapters.

Also uhhh this fic broke 100 kudos !! I actually feel like crying lmao thank you all so so much ❤❤ Have a good day/night/etc. and happy belated Easter & Passover to those who celebrate :)

Maybe Then You'll See A Different Side Of Me

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: heavy depression & depressive thoughts, crying, self harm, and a slight innuendo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Logically, Neil knows Todd just woke up. He could feel the stirring beside him. And logically, he knows he should say something like "Morning, beautiful" or "How'd you sleep" or at the very least, kiss his cheek. However, he can't seem to make himself move.

It's a bad one. He's had crappy mornings, sure, mornings where Todd has to talk to him a minute so he's motivated enough to get out of bed. But never this bad, not with Todd. For 3 years, he'd roomed with Charlie, and Charlie had seen plenty, was practically a pro, and then last year, when Cameron came, Neil (by some luck) ended up rooming alone.

He's never had someone new deal with this. And he really, really doesn't want to.

"Hey, baby." Neil feels Todd kiss his forehead, running a hand through his hair. For a second, Neil thinks it might give him that extra jolt of energy he needs. It doesn't. "You up?"

"Yeah," He forces the word out, but it sounds fainter than he wanted. Todd, of course, is immediately alert.

"Are you okay?"

Neil sighs, curling deeper into the bed. He has to be honest. He promised. "Bad morn'."

"How bad?"

He winces. It's not a 5, he's sure. He'd know if it was a 5. He wouldn't be able to speak clearly and non-sobbingly if it was a 5. Maybe it's a 4, but he'd hate to say it's a 4 and then find out tomorrow's even worse and today was really a 3. And if he says it's a 4, Todd will worry, though he's probably worried now because Neil isn't responding to him...

"Neil, baby?"

"4."

"I'm sorry," Todd says, sounding like he really is. It makes Neil's skin crawl a bit. "Is there anything I can do?"

He shakes his head slightly. "Tell the teachers 'm sick?"

Todd's hand rubs his shoulder. "You're not coming to classes?"

"Can't," Neil's voice is almost whiny, and he hates himself for it. "Ask Char. Knows what t' say."

"Okay... Do you want me to stay with you?"

He shakes his head again, and swallows, trying to gain more strength for his voice. "I'm fine. Don' worry. I love you."

Todd sighs. "I love you too. Call me if you need me. Please."

He agrees, and Todd hugs him gently before leaving. And then Neil's alone. He burrows himself deeper under the covers, pillow shoving into his face to the point where it's hard for him to breathe. It still smells like Todd. He breathes in, breathes out, and promptly bursts into tears.

It's not a loud sort of crying. He's not sobbing or anything. He's too tired for that. Too wiped, too detached, too... Numb. He doesn't pant, or wheeze. The tears just start trailing from his eyes, leaking into his mouth with a disgustingly salty taste that he wants to wipe away, but he can't move. Not to wipe his cheeks, not to move his pillow away from his face, not to grab his phone and play music. The most he can do is bring his knees up a little further, and hug himself a little tighter.

It's still not a 5. It's close, a 4.5, maybe. But it's not a 5. It's just a 4. An awful, shitty, gut-punching 4 that's making his throat close up and his stomach clench. Neil's mad, honestly, because he had a perfect week. 1,1,1, all across the board. Then Monday rolls around and all of a sudden, he's drowning.

Maybe this is what happens after having a good week. Maybe this is making up for lost time. He hugs his knees tighter. Maybe he should've seen this coming.

He hears the door open, and a small whimper escapes. God, no. Todd

can't see him like this. Please, no.

"Hey, bud." The hand on his shoulder is rough, calloused. He melts under it. Just Charlie. He shakes his head lightly, looking towards the door.

"We have a substitute in first. I can miss one period. How bad's it today?"

Neil opens his mouth, but nothing will come out. He's officially used up all his energy for talking. Great.

"5?" He shakes his head. "4?" A nod. "Oh, Neily..." Charlie sits on the bed, pulling the covers down and pulling Neil up and into a hug. Neil shivers, letting out a sob.

"Any reason?" He shakes his head. "Just bad?" A nod. "Okay. That's okay. I got ya." Charlie rubs his back, the perfect balance between firm and gentle, and Neil melts into it, latching onto Charlie with a just-too-tight grip. "I got ya. You're alright."

Charlie, as always, knows exactly what to do. He holds Neil for what feels like hours, but realistically, Neil is sure was only a few minutes, just long enough for the sobbing to fade out. Then, he reaches for Neil's phone.

"Okay, all of your favorite musicals are depressing, and I don't think that's a great idea right now. So, what's a happy, light-hearted musical I can play? Because none of these look happy to me."

Neil makes grabbing hands for the phone.

"Spongebob: The Musical? Fancy taste, Perry," Charlie grins teasingly.

Neil nods, curling back into Charlie as the music plays. He doesn't know when he falls asleep, only that he's disappointed when he wakes up. The bad days are always better when he manages to sleep them away.

His phone is plugged in, the music still playing and his notes app is open. He rubs a few tears from his eyes and reads. Charlie's back in class, Charlie or Todd will check in later, please call if he needs something, etc.

He clicks his phone off, stopping the music with it. It's too loud, and his brain is buzzing. His brain is buzzing and loud and full, so so full.

His hands find their way to his hair, pulling hard enough for it to really hurt, but it doesn't distract from the buzzing. Oh, and his eyes are beginning to water. Fuck. Hasn't he cried enough today?

He knows what will stop the buzzing. Or at the very least, distract from it. He knows, he knows, he knows, but he doesn't even have his blades, or his knives, but he could always find something, there's scissors in the desk drawer, but he can't, he can't, he's trying to do better, he's been doing better, why doesn't he feel b e t t e r?!

He groans, jumping from the bed and yanking open the drawer to the desk. Whatever, he can apologize l a t e r, it's h i s decision, he doesn't need to feel bad for doing the only thing that h e l p s. His hand reaches out to wrap around the scissors, and he sees it. A pack of markers.

Neil closes his eyes. Fuck. It's got to be worth a shot, right? He opens the box, pulling out one that's red. It's not going to leave a scar, but there'll be red and there'll be pressure, and hell, maybe he'll get ink poisoning.

He uncaps it and sprawls out on the bed, aiming straight for his arm. Once he starts writing, he can't stop. It starts out as lines, slashes, and evolves into words. It's what he thinks of the world, what he thinks of himself, what he's sure other people think of him, until there's no room left on either arm, so he moves to the legs, and when those are full, the stomach.

It's refreshing, in a way. He's never been able to do this much, without fear of losing too much blood. And he's never been able to let all these thoughts out. Todd's the one that's good with words, not Neil. Neil's words stay inside of him, building up, until they overflow into... Well, this, he supposes.

Once he's tired himself out (and God, he is tired), he throws the marker back on the desk, slips on clothing, and heads to the showers.

It's... Nice. Showers are always nice, after he has a bad period, but this one is nice in particular. As he's scrubbing at his body, the marker just starts... Washing off. It's just cheap magic marker, so it comes right off. Never, in a million years, would he have guessed this would be so therapeutic, but it is. Watching words like "disappointment", "burden", "dumbass", "bad", and "alone" slowly fading from his body. He feels like he can breathe.

When he comes back into the dorm, Todd's there, looking massively

relieved to see him out of bed. Todd pulls him into a hug, softly saying, "You smell like mangos".

Neil chuckles. "That'd be the conditioner."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Actually... Yeah." He smiles at the realization.

Todd smiles back. "That's great."

Neil sits on the bed, pushing his still-soaked bangs away from his eyes.

Todd joins him, nudging his shoulder gently. "Well... I was thinking you and I could skip study group tonight."

He gasps. "Mr. Anderson! So rebellious! And what would we be missing such an important educational opportunity for?"

"Movies, snacks, cuddling... Maybe more if we're feeling it."

"More than cuddling? You mean kissing?! I'm telling Nolan!"

Todd laughs. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a definitely."

Neil lays down and Todd joins, snuggled close with his head resting on Neil's chest. Neil combs his hands through Todd's hair, humming softly. "I love you."

"I love you too. You're so amazing," Todd murmurs.

Neil looks down at him. "What?"

"You're amazing."

Neil pauses, swallowing a hard lump in his throat. "Oh."

'Amazing'.

In all the words he's called himself, he's never thought of that one.

Chapter End Notes

A hopeful chapter ending? In MY fic? It's more likely than you think!

Shoutout to Spongebob the musical for being my go-to pick-me-up musical (along with In The Heights) bc it's just,,, it's so happy,,, and pure,,,

Ever So Slightly, Daily And Nightly

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: implied eating disorders & self-harm, and- as part of the Spring Awakening script- discussions of sex (that I'd say are pretty non-descriptive).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All Todd can think is if Neil keeps on like this, he's going to pass out.

"And the girl playing Wendla sounded absolutely gorgeous- It was really impressive! And oh, oh my God, the scene with Hanschen in the bathroom, it was so hilarious! The director kept having to yell at us because he could hear us laughing, but he was just that good! I think I did alright overall, of course, we're all reading from our scripts- it IS just the first day, after all, but the Thea- I think her name was Harmony? I'm still learning names. Anywho, she said she loved my verse in Bitch of Living, so I'm excited!"

Todd smiles fondly. "That sounds great, love, but maybe you should sit down and save all this energy for next rehearsal?"

"You can't just tell me to SIT, Todd, like it's that easy," Neil whines, but obliges.

"Have you told the guys yet?"

"Not yet! I'm going to surprise them tomorrow."

"How did Ginny do?"

Neil's eyes light up. "Oh, fantastic, obviously! The minute the Mama Who Bore Me Reprise started, I mean- chills. She's already so good, and she knew most of it without the script. Everyone was talking about it!"

"That's great."

"Mhm! We ran through the first 30 minutes-ish, we stopped at My Junk, and on Wednesday we're picking up from there. I'm going to read through the next few pages like mad until then, I want to show up extra prepared, you know?"

"I do. Maybe we should go down and eat first, though?"

Neil looks up from his already-opened script. "Oh. Right. I actually ate on the way here," He lies, "But I'll come down and sit with you guys!"

Todd smiles. "Sounds great."

Neil, predictably, is restless throughout dinner, practically running back to their dorm and yanking the script open. Todd rolls his eyes, smiling and leaving him be. For a moment.

He glances up, and Neil's hand is pulling at his hair. Todd goes over, placing his hand over Neil's. Their hands lower, Todd giving Neil's a reassuring squeeze.

"Sorry," Neil says. "Just trying to concentrate."

"It's okay. Can I help with anything?"

"Well..."

"Yeah?"

When he doesn't get a reply, Todd looks up.

"Oh no."

Neil gives him the evilest of puppy dog eyes. "Please?"

"Neil..."

"Pleeease?"

Todd huffs, joining him on the bed. "Alright, alright. What scene are we doing?"

"You're the greatest! Ok, so Moritz and Melchior-"

"His best friend whose a dick but didn't really mean to be?"

"I'll explain him more later, but that works for now, so yes, him. So, Melchior's just given Moritz an essay teaching him about... Well, about sex. And Moritz goes over to Melchior's house to discuss it."

"Ah."

Neil winces a bit. "The uh, the catch is... I kind of want to practice the

song."

Todd flushes. "Neil..."

"It's only the first bit. And your voice is beautiful, baby, it is. Please? It's just me."

"Okay," Todd smiles. "Show me the tune."

Neil squeals, kissing his cheek. "I'll play the song, alright? And we're just the first part."

Todd just sits back and listens, soaking it in. It's a beautiful song, he agrees. But Neil's a million times more beautiful, eyes lighting up as he hums along. Todd thinks he might not be able to handle seeing Neil live and on stage. He's worried his heart will beat so fast that he faints.

"Ready?" Neil asks. Todd nods, and Neil takes a deep breath, looking at him... Differently. He gets into character so deeply, Todd knows, but there's always just a bit of his Neil shining through.

"This part here," Neil reads. "Is it true?"

"Absolutely," Todd replies.

Neil glances up from the script, voice still in character. "But, how can you understand that, Melchi? What the woman must feel?"

Todd looks down at the next line and blushes a bit. When he looks up, Neil's as red as he is. "Giving yourself over to someone else? Defending yourself, until finally, you surrender and feel Heaven break over you?"

Neil looks at him, and Todd sees more Neil than Moritz, for a moment. Then, he ducks his head down.

"I just put myself in her place, and imagine."

"Really?" Neil says. "What it feels like? For the woman?"

Todd flips the script's page, singing quietly. "Where I go, when I go there, no more memory anymore. Only drifting on some ship; the wind that whispers of the distance to shore..."

Neil looks up, eyes meeting Todd's, and God, when he starts singing, Todd can't breathe. "Where I go, when I go there, no more listening anymore. Only hymns upon your lips; a mystic wisdom, rising with

them, to shore..."

Todd continues, "Touch me, just like that. And that- oh, yeah. Now, that's Heaven. Now, that I like. God, that's so nice..."

Neil picks up the script as Todd finishes, going back to speaking. "Still, you must admit, that with the differing, uh... Genitalia... It truly is daunting, how everything might, uh..."

"Measure up? Fit? Moritz, not that I'm saying I myself have ever..."

"Not that I'm saying I would never want... Would ever not want to... Would ever want to not... I have to go!"

"Moritz, wait!"

It's quiet a moment, before Neil closes the script. "And then, uh, Moritz runs off, and Melchior talks to his mother, and the song continues, but um. I'm not in it until the end."

"Oh," Todd says softly. "You sound great."

Neil, if possible, blushes darker. "Thanks. I still need to practice a lot more."

"Hey. Everyone does. That's why you're rehearsing."

"That's true... I missed this, you know."

Todd cocks his head. "What do you mean?"

"Rehearsing with you," Neil says.

Todd can feel his heart ache, because he's missed it too. He really has. This entire atmosphere of Neil, exploding into a role, and Todd, barely able to get through the script, but somehow the only one Neil ever wants to run lines with. It's so familiar, so reminiscent of Midsummer, and it's both enthralling and terrifying.

"I missed this too," Todd says, and Neil kisses him so, so softly that Todd melts. "Come on then," He smiles. "We'll run it again."

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a simpler chapter because I just wanted a Todd & Neil rehearsal scene tbh

Where Streets Are Paved With Bricks Of Gold

Chapter Notes

> Chapter warnings for: Emotionally abusive parenting, homophobia, a bad coming out experience, one use of the f-slur, and crying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil casts another nervous look around the hall. No one was there two seconds ago, and no one's come in since. Still, a cowardly part of him can't help but hope a teacher comes in, needing to talk to him. Anything to get him away from this conversation.

"And you're staying on top of your assignments, I assume?"

"Yes, sir."

He can almost hear his father's mute nod.

"I've got all As."

"That's my son."

His hand fidgets with the edge of the phone, waiting.

"Well. If there's nothing else..."

"Actually, Father, there sort of is."

"Alright. Go on, then."

He sighs heavily, trying to pysch himself up. He told everyone his plan earlier today. It's too late to back out now.

"I uh... I was thinking about- Well, the thing is," Neil squeezes his eyes shut. "I've signed up for another show."

Complete silence on the other end of the line.

"I've got the part already. And we've started rehearsing."

"More of this acting business?" His father asks, voice tight.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought we'd discussed this."

"I..." He breathes. "I don't think we did, actually."

"I do not want you in another play."

"Technically, it's not a-"

His father huffs. "Don't get smart with me, Neil!"

"Please. It makes me happy."

"It's pointless."

"It will look great on applications!"

"Don't you raise your voice at me," He snaps. "You are my son. Do what you're told."

Neil grips the phone tighter. "No."

"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

"No."

Time comes to a stop, Neil swears it does. His first instinct is to apologize immediately, but he holds it back. This is something he has to do. He can't... He can't live under his father's shoe forever. He refuses.

"You listen to me, Neil." Mr. Perry's voice is deadly. "You are quitting this play. I forbid you from anymore of this acting. It's foolishness, do you understand me? It is distracting you from your studies. It is immature. And it is not a young man's pursuit."

His pauses. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's girlish. Do you honestly expect to find yourself a wife when-"

"Father, if you haven't figured out I'm gay by now, I don't know what to tell you."

Neil has no idea where it comes from. That confession was NOT part of the plan for this conversation. Now, though, there's no taking it back.

His father sputters. "You- I don't- Excuse me?"

Neil has to laugh. It's only going to get him in more trouble, but he's already in deep shit. He might as well start swimming around in it. He laughs so hard, because for once- for the first time- Tom Perry is completely speechless.

"I'm a faggot, sir. Thought you knew that already."

"You..."

The line clicks. Neil pulls the phone from his ear and looks. His father has officially hung up on him. His father officially knows he's gay. His father...

His father knows he's in the show. That's what he called to do. And now, he's done it. He sighs, looking around the empty hall.

What the hell is he supposed to do now?

Neil breathes in. Breathes out. Texts the group: "I did it". The replies come pouring in, and he reads through them. Meeks asks if they're still on for the meeting later, Neil texts yes. Calm. Methodical. Detached.

The meeting's in about an hour and a half. So, he goes to the library, finds a small, secluded spot, slips on his headphones, and allows himself to cry, even though he's not exactly sure what it is he's crying over.

After a little while, he sits up. He feels better, he thinks. At the very least, his mind is a bit clearer. He packs his things up, leaves, and heads to the cave.

They're waiting for him outside the entrance.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. Got held up doing some..." Neil trails off, staring at his friends' faces. "What?"

Knox grins. "Go on inside."

"O...kay, then." Slowly, Neil makes his way past them and goes in. "Holy shit."

The cave is decked out. Streamers, banners, balloons, and glitter are covering every inch of the space, with a giant table full of food in the center.

"How?!"

"I know a guy," Charlie says smoothly.

"And," Pitts finger guns him, "It's the fancy eco-decomposable shit."

Neil laughs. "I don't understand. What's it for?"

Cameron scoffs, but along with the others, he's smiling wide. "Check the cake, dumbass."

Neil walks over, peering down. He beams. " 'Congrats On Your Broadway Shit'. I love it." He looks up at them. "You guys didn't have to do this."

"We figured you'd need a pick-me-up after talking with your father," Todd says.

"Plus," Charlie smirks, "This is the perfect story for you to tell when you're on a talk show with James Corden someday."

"Very true," Neil laughs. "So, is there even a real meeting tonight?"

"We'll see where the night takes us," Meeks says, voice full of playful mystery. "Come on, guys. I'm starving."

Pitts makes a beeline for the food, the others following suit. Once everyone's seated, Knox turns to Neil, an excited look on his face.

"You know what would make this even better?"

Neil rolls his eyes fondly. "What's that?"

"Dinner... And a show."

The group explodes.

"Yessss!"

"C'mon, Perry!"

"Give us a preview!"

"Neilllllll, pleeeeease?"

He lets out a dramatic groan. "Well, I suppose if I MUST." Neil stands, giggling as the guys shine their flashlights on him.

"Go on!"

Neil clears his throat, beginning to sing. "There's a moment you know... You're fucked."

They laugh, and Neil continues, confidence steadily growing. After he's finished, Charlie decides to lead the group in a rendition of Careless Whisper, complete with saxophone riffing. Neil eats piece after piece of cake, unable to remember the last time he smiled so much.

"We should go," Cameron says eventually, sounding reluctant. "It's starting to flurry."

"Think we'll wake up to a full blanket of snow tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

Neil sighs contently. "Thanks, guys. I needed this."

"Anytime," Meeks smiles.

As they're leaving, arms full of trash and decorations, Neil casts another look back at the cave. He's tired, and scared. But mostly, he's happy. He's so damn happy he could burst.

Screw his father. He's got a much better family backing him up.

Chapter End Notes

See? Happier than the warnings made it seem (mostly)!

I Finally Wanna Be Alive

Chapter Notes

The aftermath of last chapter

Warnings for: mentioned bad coming out experience, referenced guns and self harm, crying, and discussion of suicide.

For context- for those of you who don't know Spring Awakening: (spolier alert:) The character Neil's playing, Moritz, kills himself around the halfway point of the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the middle of the night and he's still wide awake. Neil has headphones on and music streaming through them, trying to calm himself down. There are too many thoughts are swimming around his head, a mixture of his father's voice when he came out, and his friends clapping when he finished singing. He's got the musical's soundtrack on now, almost at the end of the album.

There's a ringing silence in his head as the song playing fades out, until the next one starts. Neil's heart clenches, a feeling he can't quite name busting as he turns on his phone and looks down. The Song Of Purple Summer. The finale. His hands are shaking violently as he turns up the volume.

It was only flurrying when they had left the cave earlier that night, but as the night aged, it had turned much heavier. Now, there's what must be at least 4 feet of snow, with the lightest bit still pouring down.

As he looks out the window, all he can think of is the scene where Moritz kills himself. All he can think about is the fact that in one of the coming rehearsals, he's going to have to stand on a stage, and pretend to kill himself.

They haven't gotten there yet. They're still on act one. But Neil knows they won't be there much longer. Soon, Neil's going to have to face that scene. And while he's confident he can do it, that's not what scares him. It's the idea of doing it in front of people. In front of an audience.

Well, at least he'll be able to act it out well.

The song has ended, Neil realizes, but he's not ready for that yet, so he starts over. It's snowing outside, just like the snow Ilse tells Moritz about- before he kills himself- Neil has to rehearse killing himself on stage- and it's so cold that when Neil breathes he can see the air reflecting it. Even though he KNOWS it's just some dumb fictional character, he can't help but wonder if Moritz could see his own breaths in the air as he raised the gun to his temple.

It's terrifying, absolutely paralyzing, because he's been dreaming of dying since he was a little kid (he was in seventh grade, fuck, he was in middle school the first time he really wanted to die, and he had been all alone) and he's almost gotten it too (Charlie screaming that he couldn't keep mutilating himself, Todd telling him he didn't have to keep punishing himself, because there was nothing to punish, Meeks and Pitts and Knox and Cameron eyeing him whenever something went wrong) but despite all that, despite all of it, he's still alive, and the proof is right there in front of his eyes, right there in the frigid breaths he's letting out.

He keeps thinking about how it was cold, during that scene, when a character he never knew he needed died. It's cold now, too, but Neil's watching his breathing fill the atmosphere, listening to the lyrics leaking through his headphones, and it's not fair, he realizes, any of it. It's not fair that these innocent little kids die, kids like the ones in the show, and it's not fair that he's almost jealous of them.

That's when the thought enters his brain. He's... Not jealous. He doesn't want to die. Not really. It's a scary, foreign thought, a statement he's never even considered. Neil Perry Doesn't Want To Die. It's not right. It's just not right.

And Neil can feel himself start crying, turning the music up as loud as it will go, but it doesn't drown out the profound realization that Neil Perry, NEIL PERRY, doesn't want to die, and maybe he never has. Maybe he just wants to live a different life. Maybe he just wants to escape his problems. Maybe he just wanted to fall asleep with someone who cares without feeling like a burden the next morning.

The song is playing for the third time, and before he's even realized, he's so overwhelmed that he starts laughing. It's a wet laugh, the kind of laugh that borders on crying, but he can't stop, and he's smiling, because holy shit. He doesn't want to die.

Todd shifts in the bed beside him, and Neil tries to quiet down, but he can't, so he grabs a coat and walks outside. He starts walking through

the field that he knows well, he's rehearsed lines here, he's told jokes here, he discovered the Dead Poets Society here. It's snowing, starting to come down hard again.

Neil sticks his tongue out, catching snowflakes, laughing like a little kid. He sticks his arms out next, spinning around in circles as faster and faster. He falls to the ground, body soaked in snow, but he can't stop giggling and snorting and... Laughing. Right now, he doesn't care if he wakes up the whole school. He doesn't care if Nolan comes storming out he's expelled right this very second. He's infinite. Free. And for once in his life, he doesn't want to die.

In that moment, Neil makes a promise to himself. It's the kind of promise that involves breaking a previous one. Neil once promised himself that he'd never try to tell an adult about how he truly felt ever again, not after the wasted attempt with his parents (Neil's father was predictably dismissive, telling him he was being overdramatic and needed to man up a bit. His mother seemed worried, but as always she didn't contradict her husband. Neil decided not to try talking to an adult about his thoughts in the future). However, Neil decides that tomorrow, he's going to walk straight to Mr. Keating's office and tell him everything. After all, Keating's done a good job of acting better than most adults so far.

A part of Neil screams at himself that this is temporary, that when he gets up tomorrow, he'll feel just as bad as usual, but Neil mentally flips off that voice. He's not stupid, he knows he's not going to turn it all around, but he's going to try his best. And it's a start, dammit.

It's a start.

Chapter End Notes

> Me: Alright. It's my birthday. What should I do today
> My brain: It's been like a week since you've thought about Neil Perry,,, you should get on that
>
> Hope u guys enjoyed this one! Next chapter is one I'm excited for (hint: It's from a certain Todd's perspective 👀👀)

I've Been Here For The Show

Chapter Notes

It's Todd p.o.v. time lads

So so sorry about the wait on this one. Between end of year work/exams and an extra nasty bout of depression, this chapter took a little while to get finished. Luckily, I've got a few chapters backlogged so I should be able to catch up and get us back to fairly regular updates! 🎉🎊🎉

Warnings for this chapter: discussions of suicide, depression, mania, crying, lying, therapy, speech impediments, anxiety, violence, anger issues, child abuse/neglect, medication, throwing up, nightmares, and spiraling thoughts.

(I swear this chapter is n o t as dark as it sounds, none of these are really shown explicitly, just talked about. Our blonde boy has a lot on his mind)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Through his vague semi-consciousness, Todd reaches out a hand, blindly feeling for Neil's. When he doesn't find it, he wrenches one eye open. Neil isn't there. He gets up and looks around the room, trying to push down the worry creeping up. Then, he notices the window is open.

He looks outside, and there's Neil. Making... A snowman? He should probably be concerned by the manic movements, especially because it's freezing and Neil looks like he's still in his pajamas, but honestly? He's kinda happy just to see Neil having fun. Running around the field like he owns it, which he kind of does.

Almost every single time Todd's walked that field, Neil's been right beside him. Almost. There's been a few occasions where he fancied a stroll, or where Neil was asleep, or where Neil... Wasn't available.

"Todd. Todd."

"He tried to kill himself."

"It's so beautiful."

He shivers. Neil's outside. Just outside. Playing in the snow.

The snow Todd ran through. The snow he screamed against. The snow he choked down, trying to get the taste of acid out of his throat. The snow he fell and crumpled into. The snow that was so, so beautiful. But not beautiful like Neil. Nothing's ever been beautiful like Neil.

Though Todd's always been a bit of a cynic, he has to admit that in Neil's case, he knew from the beginning. Not in a "love at first sight" way, but more of a, "you're so familiar, were we best friends in a previous version of our lives?"

It all changed with one sentence.

"Hey, I hear we're gonna be roommates."

"I'm Neil Perry."

"Todd Anderson."

If he's being honest, that's all he really remembers of the start. Everything else happened so fast. Soon, he's being introduced to a whole group of people, and an insane teacher, and the boy he barely knows but is going to be spending his year with is doing everything he can to convince Todd to come read poetry in the woods.

Those were the important events, for sure, but that's not what Todd remembers. Todd remembers the little moments in between. He remembers clapping and chanting while Meeks reads, the hysterical laughing as Keating does his best John Wayne, erasing his attempts at poetry so many times that the paper starts to rip.

And through it all, he remembers Neil. Neil, banging a tune on the cave's walls. Neil, laughing right beside him, drowning in verse. Neil, ripping the paper from his hands, chasing him around the room, grabbing his hands, and being the very first person who ever talked to Todd because that's who he wanted to talk to.

Neil, promising to take care of Todd whether he needs it or not. Neil,

stomping his feet as he bangs away at a fake letter. Neil, staring at him with wide eyes as he stands in the front of the cheering class, making him wonder if maybe, possibly, Neil just might love him back.

Neil, falling to the ground as he tackles him into a hug. Neil, leaning on his shoulder while Knox calls Chris. Neil, grinning as the desk set is thrown off the school's bridge.

Looking back at the year is like watching one of Neil's plays... But not one of the comedies. Todd's certain they're living a tragedy, or maybe a tragicomedy. While he was living it, all he could do was laugh, but now, as he sorts through the memories, trying to make sense of what's been handed to him, all he sees is the foreshadowing, the foreboding sense that whoever is writing their story knows more than he ever did.

Neil, promising he doesn't care about some stupid annual. Neil, looking around uncomfortably as Keating reminds them of the inevitable. Neil, full of desperate hope as he recites Tennyson's promise that it isn't too late to seek a newer world.

Neil, screaming at him to pick whose side he's on. Neil, hiding a wince as Knox threatens to kill himself. Neil, insisting he has to talk to Keating before he goes to bed.

At some point, Todd fell in love with Neil. And at some point, Todd realized something was off about Neil. Somehow, he has no idea when either event happened.

He remembers that some nights, Neil would stay up all night, running around the room, pacing, scribbling and writing for projects that he thinks of and abandons all in that one night, animatedly rambling without realizing Todd's fallen asleep.

Other nights, Neil would lay in bed, awake, but dead to the world, silent tears streaming down his face, tracing imprints on the wall, curled into himself like a child who'd gotten lost and didn't know how to get back home.

Neil would be screaming, fists clenched and words hissed, and two minutes later, he'd be beaming, eyes sparkling and voice so soft. A hurricane, always. A flurry of words and actions and thoughts and emotions, so fast that he couldn't even keep up with himself most of the time.

Todd knows Neil's a good actor now, and knows he must've acted through the year, but the realization that Todd has no idea what was

and wasn't a facade haunts him.

All the spontaneous actions that the old Todd found magical turned dazed, frantic, and desperate the minute Todd finds out what's happened. All the quiet nights where Todd had assumed he was tired from a long day turned into searching through memories, trying to remember if there were sobs under the loud blowing sound of the air conditioner.

The only good news is Todd has someone to talk to. He's been in therapy practically his entire life. Speech therapy when he was in elementary school, when his teacher told his parents she thought that stutter was something to look into. Actual therapy, when the speech therapist told them there was more under the surface, not just a physical impediment.

His parents, of course, thought it was all bullshit, insisting that, "Being nervous isn't a disorder, it's him trying to get attention. But fine. If it gets him to stop freaking out all the time." And while that isn't at all true, Todd remembers angrily thinking that his parents ignoring him his entire life certainly didn't help.

On paper, Todd's in therapy for anxiety. Inside the office, he's in therapy for so much more. He's in therapy for anger issues, for beating the shit out of a bully as a result of years and years of jealousy and frustration and confusion built up inside him with absolutely no outlet. He's in therapy for child neglect, for getting hypothermia from sitting on the school steps until eight at night because his parents forgot to pick him up.

He's in therapy for anxiety, for throwing up and shaking and passing out in the bathroom because of an awful anxiety attack that might've been prevented if his parents had refilled his prescription four weeks ago, when Todd ran out and asked them to get more so he didn't go through a fucking withdrawl. So yeah, maybe his parents paying him attention wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Luckily, Dr. Thomas is exceedingly good at his job. He's kind, and gentle, and understanding, and unafraid to tell Todd when his spiraling thoughts are absolutely ridiculous. Dr. Thomas also encourages Todd's newfound love of poetry, and asks him to journal his thoughts through poems, rather than the traditional, "dear diary". Todd finds himself thinking Thank God, because he absolutely despised the daily journaling before.

Dr. Thomas also knows Todd is gay. He knows Todd is in a relationship with his roommate. He knows his roommate also has trouble. At first, Todd had been terrified to mention a boy at all, worried his parents would check in with his therapist and, because he was a minor, Dr. Thomas would be forced to out him. Luckily, his parents are constantly impressing him with just how little they actually give a shit.

So, they never find out, and his therapist does. And when Neil's put in the hospital, Todd skips visiting him and calls for an emergency appointment.

Now, Neil's become a fairly normal topic of conversation for them. Todd, admittedly, still hasn't told Neil yet. And though the guilt is killing him, he'd hate to make Neil feel bad, or like he was too much for Todd.

At first, Todd felt stupid for talking about Neil in the first place. Boo hoo, his boyfriend feels like shit, but TODD'S the one suffering here, not Neil. By now, though, he's heard Dr. Thomas explain enough times that things like trauma and mental illness affect the people around a person, too. Taking care of Neil isn't his job, and if he's sick with worry over Neil, that isn't healthy. These things are hard for everyone in the relationship, and it's okay to need a break, or to vent to someone else.

And really, Todd has accepted that.

Except... There's the late nights, when he's up by himself, watching Neil sleep, and that little voice in his head starts screaming at him that if Neil is hurting, it's because Todd isn't enough. Most times, when that happens, Todd takes a deep breath, placing his hand on his stomach and counting his breaths.

Other times, that isn't enough. So, he scoots closer to Neil, and holds him, trying to remind himself that Neil's okay. Neil's okay, and Todd's enough, and Neil's okay, and Todd's enough.

He runs his fingers through Neil's hair, combing perfectly in sync with his breaths. Neil's sleeping peacefully, a small smile on his face. Todd stares at him, soaking in the quiet, rare snores that mean he's deep asleep, and wonders what he's dreaming of.

Todd yawns, hand slowly falling out of Neil's hair to rest on his shoulder. He's tired. He knows he needs to sleep, and he does plan to, but this is around the time when Neil starts to toss in his sleep, when

his smile can fall and his snoring can turn to muttering.

However, as the time comes, Neil remains still. He waits another moment, then breathes a sigh of relief. He bends his head to Neil's shoulder to kiss his chin, and finds his head staying there. Neil lets out a quiet hum, and nuzzles closer.

Todd closes his eyes and soaks in the feeling of his head gently lift up and down with Neil's breathing. He pulls the blanket over them, and starts to sing, praying it will lull Neil to stay asleep.

"I couldn't help but ask for you to say it all again. I tried to write it down, but I could never find a pen. I'd give anything to hear you say it one more time, that the universe was made just to be seen by my eyes.

With shortness of breath, I'll explain the infinite. How rare and beautiful it truly is that we exist..."

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks/shoutout to the commenter Anderperry bc one of their comments inspired the Sleeping At Last bit at the end!

Help Me Get My Feet Back On The Ground

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: Mentally abusive parenting, eating disorders, and crying

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Look, Neil can't be good at everything. No one can. Still, (without bragging, of course) Neil likes to consider himself pretty close. He's in Mrs. Brauner's class, which he's told is the smartest class in second grade. Mrs. Brauner must think he's a good reader too, because she always lets him read out loud to the rest of the class. And whenever Charlie gets hurt (pretty often) and Neil fixes him up, Charlie seems to think it's amazing. So yeah, Neil thinks he's doing alright for himself.

Then, he gets a D on a science quiz.

"I don't know what happened!" He hisses, trying to avoid any teachers walking past. They've already been in here too long, bathroom breaks are supposed to be quick. He sinks to the floor beside one of the sinks.

Charlie takes the paper, squinting at it. "Maybe she got the answers wrong?"

"That doesn't happen! Adults are always right! I got all this wrong!"

Charlie bites his lip. "Well, that's okay. I get D's sometimes."

"What do your parents say?"

"They're... Not happy."

Neil moans and buries his face in his hands.

"Hey, cheer up. It's just one test. You're still straight A's, right?" A small nod. "There. Plus, you're still the smartest person I know."

Neil looks up. "Really?"

"Definitely. Pinkie swear."

He smiles a little. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Sure. Now, come on before Mr. Gregory throws a fit." He grins. "This

is my third hall pass today."

"Why are you so quiet tonight?"

Neil looks up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Typically, by now you're bouncing off the walls telling me you and Charles ate grass for the first time." Mr. Perry rolls his eyes at the thought. "Did something happen?"

"Um... Well..." Does he say something? He has to, doesn't he? Oh, they're going to be so mad. He doesn't even understand how he missed so much! They're going to be so disappointed...

"What is it?"

"Nothing, Mother."

Mr. Perry fixes him with a look. "Neil, what's the rule about lying?"

Neil blanches. He doesn't want to lie! How is he supposed to say this? He feels like he can't breathe. "I... I... IgotaDonatest."

"What was that?"

"Speak up, you know how frustrating mumbling is."

"I um... So, what happened was... Well, Mrs. Brauner handed out the test, right? And it was kind of short, like 10 questions, but-"

"Neil," he huffs, "Don't use 'like'. And don't stutter. It makes you sound unintelligent. Do you want to sound that way?"

"No, sir."

"Then speak normally and get to the point."

"I... We- we took the test, and-" He can't do it. He can't say this. "And- and-" Both his parents are getting annoyed, he can tell, he has to hurry up. "Um..." He grabs the packet out of his bag and shoves it in their hands. He can't watch. It gets handed back a minute later.

"Is this yours?" Mrs. Perry asks. She sounds shocked.

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbles.

"Why did you score so low?"

"I- I don't know."

"You studied last night, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many times did you go over the material?"

"I don't really know..."

"Well, it clearly wasn't enough."

"Did anyone else score this low, Neil?" Mrs. Perry asks.

"I'm not sure..."

"Probably because of the aquarium trip. If you can't balance schoolwork with your friends, then we're not going to let you do things like that, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can't get grades like this, Neil. Do you expect to get into Welton this way? Do you expect to get into Harvard this way?"

Neil can feel himself tearing up. He hates getting in trouble. "No, sir."

"I expect this not to happen again. If it does, there's going to be serious consequences. For now..." Mr. Perry trails off. How the hell does he punish this? The only thing Neil really likes to do is read, and not reading got him here in the first place. "Go upstairs and get in bed."

"He hasn't eaten." Mrs. Perry says.

"I'm aware. Now, Neil. And let me see the test again."

Neil hands it to him, and Mr. Perry looks at it a minute. "Hm." He walks over to the fridge and promptly tears down one of Neil's report cards, hanging the test up in its place. "Let that serve as a reminder to do better. Go to bed, then."

No next meal becomes his standard punishment, to the point where Neil's learned not to ask when he knows he's in trouble. It's awful for

the first little while, but his stomach must adjust, because soon he can just ignore the cramping. The habit follows him to school too, confusing Charlie.

Knox, the new kid who braids flower crowns and marries Casey Landon and starts sitting with them later that week, ends up asking Charlie why Neil doesn't eat all his lunch.

"I dunno. He used to."

By the time he reaches Welton, all his classmates just take it in stride. "Yeah, Perry needs some meat on his bones." "He's got to live up to the title of twink somehow." "I swear, he never has an appetite." "In his defense, no one likes Hellton Hash." "Bet you he sneaks out at night and gets real food."

Charlie, who still remembers Neil "I Could Eat A Food Truck And Still Want Dessert" Perry, finds himself constantly stuck between "he had an early growth spurt" and "something's seriously wrong". But as a host of Neil's other problems come to light, "Neil doesn't eat much" ends up fading to the background. Todd's the one that ends up finding out first.

Chapter End Notes

> Thx for reading and I hope you all are staying safe. I know things are crazy right now, so please try to make sure you all take care of yourselves <3

I Just Want To Protect You

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: self-harm, eating disorders, panic attacks, referenced past suicide attempts, and dissasociation/ depersonalization.

When Todd walks in, Neil is on the bed, bent over something, and pulls his blanket over whatever it is as soon as he hears Todd.

"Hey," Todd says, on guard.

Neil smiles. "Hey, love. Find the book you were looking for?"

"Someone's got it checked out."

"Oh, sorry. That sucks."

"It's fine. What've you been up to?"

"Ah, not much."

Todd nods. "What were you doing when I walked in?"

"Just making the bed."

"Need any help?"

"I'm good, but thanks."

Todd nods again. "Can I see your arm?"

"My- my what?"

"Your arm, Neil."

"Todd, I wasn't-"

"Then you don't mind showing me your arm, right?"

Todd can practically see the gears turning in Neil's head, desperately searching for a way out of this. It's been two months now. Slip-ups happen, Todd knows, and he understands, really, but it still stings a bit to know his suspicions were correct. He wonders if he should've gone to the library. Maybe if he'd stayed, maybe Neil would've talked

to him, and then... No. He won't be doing that. Especially not now. Now he needs to focus.

"Neil?"

"Todd?"

He fixes him with a look, and Neil sighs before slowly rolling up his sleeve to reveal... Nothing. Did he- no, there's something more. Neil looks like he's about to pass out. Todd lays a hand on his and says softly but firmly, "I'm not mad, baby, but I need you to take your sweater off for me, okay?"

Neil pales considerably, but takes it off. There's another sweater underneath. There's a shirt underneath that. Good God, no wonder the boy's always sweaty. A tanktop gets pulled off and shit. Shit...

First and foremost, there's a row of four fresh cuts, close to his hip, in a neat little column. Todd only notices briefly, however, before every thread of his attention is pulled taught and firm around a much more pressing matter. One Todd didn't even know about.

"Neil..." It's whispered, laced in a heartbroken horror he can't keep out of his voice. Todd presses a hand against Neil's body and he can feel the ribs. "You're so thin..."

Neil jerks away as if he's been hit. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It- it was just a one-off thing, I'll give you the razor, okay? I'm sorry." He reaches for a sweater but Todd sticks his arm out, blocking him.

"We- we need to talk about this. "

Neil chuckles hollowly. "What's there to talk about? Self-mutilation. Pretty straightforward."

"Neil. Why- why did you- why were you cutting?"

"It's just been a shitty day. Nothing happened, nothing new to talk about."

"You promise me? Have you-"

"Yes, yes."

"Okay. Okay." Todd takes a heavy breath. "Then let's talk about this."

"What are we talking about?"

"Goddammit, Neil, you know what the fuck I'm talking about!"

The air is tense. Todd runs a shaky hand through his hair, breathing slightly erratic. Neil notices.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Todd can feel himself slipping, and he puts all his energy into staying grounded, on Earth, but everything is starting to pull him away. Todd wants to scream, wants to throw a temper tantrum, because now is NOT the time for a panic attack, now's the time to HELP HIS BOYFRIEND but that was the WRONG thing to think, because now he's worried sick about Neil, worried sick about this new thing he didn't notice, and what if this is the thing that does Neil in?

~~~

Todd is fast asleep when he feels someone shaking him, and he can just make out Charlie quietly saying his name before he rolls over. It's got to be early morning still, and Todd is not getting woken up for the ninth time this month because of whatever Charlie's being a disaster over now. "Oh, Charlie..."

"Todd. Todd." Charlie sounds like he's crying, which is fantastic, because now Todd looks like a dick if he ignores him. He rolls back over, blinks open his eyes, fully ready to tell Charlie that his love for the cast of Brooklyn Nine Nine will have to wait when he sees Charlie is really, really crying. And he's not the only one there. The Poets are all there, looking about as cheerful as Charlie is. His eyes instinctively flick over to the other bed. Neil's still not back yet. Todd has to tackle whatever's happening on his own.

He sits up. "What? What is it?"

"Neil's in the hospital," Charlie's voice cracks.

Shit. "W-is he okay? What- what happened?"

Knox's eyes squeeze shut and Todd can hear Charlie choke up.

"W-wha-w-" Todd forces himself to inhale and exhale. Pitts sits next to him, biting his lip so hard it bleeds as he tries to help Todd calm down. In the midst of all the chaos, Meeks' faint voice still manages to ring loud and clear. The words are spoken so quietly, so quickly, as if it will make it less true, but despite all that, Todd hears and knows he'll spend the rest of his life hearing it.
~~~

"He tried to kill himself."

~~~

Todd can still remember it so vividly. He's terrified, shit, he's terrified. What else is Neil struggling with that Todd just doesn't know? Why didn't Todd notice? He should've noticed! Shit, shit, shit!

The door opens and his head snaps up. Charlie comes strolling in, never one to knock, and stops mid-sentence as he takes in the scene.

Todd can make out what's going on but it doesn't even feel like he's there. He feels disconnected somehow, like he's watching all this unfold as someone else, watching the three of them through a TV screen.

Charlie turns to Neil and tells him to go to his room. Neil protests and looks at Todd. Charlie says Neil's going to make Todd feel worse. Todd thinks he feels mad at Charlie for saying that, but Todd realizes Charlie's not saying it to be mean, and Charlie is, admittedly, correct. Neil leaves the room. And it's the just the two three two of them. Charlie and Todd's panicking mind and Todd's autopiloted body.

Someone's telling him Neil will be fine, that he needs to focus on himself for a moment, and at first Todd thinks he's saying it to himself, but then he realizes it's actually Charlie. Charlie keeps talking, and Todd figures whatever it is he's saying has to be better than all the paranoia (there's a freak storm, snow pouring down just like that fateful morning- a gang war breaks out and parents are called to the school- some horrible flu and no one's there to watch and make sure he's not lonely- the train's rushing down the track and it runs over someone- something- something goes wrong and he's dead-) so he ends up listening to Charlie speak.

He's talking about Tan France giving John Mulaney a makeover. Figures. Though, in all fairness, listening to him ramble is actually kind of soothing. It's... Familiar.

He lets Charlie continue without protesting.
~~~

For A Moment I Forget To Worry

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: discussed panic attacks, yelling, eating disorders, self-harm, self-depreciation, mentally abusive parenting, and suicidal thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the middle of explaining why *NSYNC is better than The Backstreet Boys, Charlie comes to realization that Todd has fallen asleep. He has no idea when that happened, but he figured it would. Neil says the bad attacks always tire Todd out. Shit, Neil.

Charlie carefully untangles himself from Todd's body and watches him a minute, making sure he's still asleep. He appears to be. He pulls a blanket to over him and leaves.

If Neil's constant worried boyfriend ramblings are anything to go off of, Todd'll sleep maybe twenty minutes before he wakes up and worries over Neil again. Hopefully, if Neil is feeling a bit less like a stubborn prick than usual today, it'll only take twenty minutes to talk him. Then Neil and Todd can get themselves situated.

~~~

Neil's pacing back and forth by the time Charlie gets back. His sweater- or sweaters, rather- are all pulled back on, but that doesn't erase the memory of what Charlie and Todd both saw.

"You're going to wear a ring in the floor," he says.

His head jerks up and he runs to him. "Is Todd okay?"

"He's fine. What happened?"

Neil groans. "I messed up. I just- I kept deflecting..."

"Deflecting what?"

"Nothing."

Charlie runs a hand down the side of his face. "I saw your body, Perry. What the hell happened?"
~~~

"Nothing." It's said a bit more forcefully.

"Well, tell nothing it needs to gain a few pounds before it drops dead in the middle of an impromptu Keating soccer class."

Neil doesn't say anything.

"Is this an eating disorder?"

"What? No, no."

"Then what is it? A diet? You giving up meat?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing." He emphasizes.

"Sure doesn't seem like it."

"Well..."

Charlie sits down on his bed and stares down Neil. "I'll wait until you're ready, then."

Neil bristles at that. "I'm not a child."

"Maybe not, but you're acting like one right now. Not to mention you clearly need someone to parent you."

"You-"

"When you're ready to stop whining and actually talk, let me know, but you're not going anywhere until you do."

Neil sits on the edge of Cameron's bed, crossing his arms. Charlie keeps a steady gaze on him. It's barring into him, in a way that makes Neil think his soul is being searched. He squirms under the gaze and hates himself for it.

"It's not an eating disorder."

"Okay?"

"It's... It's sort of a diet, I suppose."

"Okay?"

He huffs. "I just- sometimes I don't have as much of an appetite. That's all."

"Mhm." Charlie keeps looking at him.

"That's it," He repeats.

"Like I said-" Charlie shifts, "When you're ready to talk, let me know."

Neil stands up, turning for the door, but Charlie puts a warning hand on his shoulder. They sit back down.

Neil's peeved. He doesn't want to be in a stand-off with his friend, and Charlie knows that, Goddammit. He can feel his resolve breaking the longer Charlie looks at him.

"It's a punishment of sorts."

To his credit, Charlie doesn't bat an eye. "What do you mean?"

"It's sort of... When I fuck something up, I skip my next meal. And I mean, you know me..." He chuckles hollowly. "Always fucking things up."

Charlie's eyebrows furrow. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you doing that shit to yourself, Neil."

Neil swallows roughly. "It's just a habit."

"From where?"

"When I was younger, um, that's what my father did. Like, his version of grounding me."

"You couldn't eat?" He says, disgusted. "That piece of shit!"

"It's really not-"

"Bullshit. He's an abusive scumbag and you know it!"

"He's not... He's hardly laid a hand on me."

"That doesn't mean he's not abusive, Neil! Starving your son and controlling his entire life and yelling at him until he's sobbing like a fucking child is abusive! How do you not see that?!"

Neil blanches, body tensing.

Charlie sighs, uncurling the fists he hadn't realized he'd made. "Sorry. Didn't mean to yell. But you see what I mean, right?"

Neil doesn't answer.

"Didn't your mother ever do anything?"

"She doesn't like confrontation."

"That's not an excuse."

Neil's silent.

One thing at a time, then. "So... Your father punishes you by taking away food. Your father isn't here. You've been here for months. So, why are you still doing this?"

He shrugs. "Someone has to, right?"

Charlie wants to throttle him. Wants to grab him by the shoulders, rattle him back and forth, and scream, "NO! NOT RIGHT!" Instead, he sighs. "You can't keep doing this, man. I'll watch you to make sure you've chewed and swallowed if I have to."

"I'm not a child," Neil repeats. "I don't need looking after."

Charlie grabs his wrist. His hand fits all the way around it. "I beg to differ."

He stiffens. "I don't want to talk about this."

Charlie speaks softly, like he's soothing a small child. That's what Neil is, at the end of the day. He never really got to be a child, and it's only in brief moments that Neil lets down his guard. When he does, you can see it in the way his eyes widen and the meekness of his voice. He's mature for his age, far too grown up, but deep down he's still the scared little kid that never learned how to take care of himself. He's never been allowed to control a single inch of his life, he confessed once, and now that he has room to breathe, he's so overwhelmed he'd rather not breathe at all.

"You'll have to. Not right now, though. Thank you for telling me the truth."

He nods.

"You want to go talk to Todd?"

"I don't want to make him upset again..."

"I know. But you two should talk about this."

Neil sighs heavily.

"Go on, then."

"Yeah. Thanks. Sorry."

"Don't be." He's said it before, he'll say it a million times more. Neil still apologizes for everything.

Charlie holds out hope, though.

Chapter End Notes

> Hoo boy. Not giving anything away, but I've got some uh... Emotional chapters coming up. I think I've finally kicked the writer's block I've been having, so I'm excited for you all to see what's in store! As always, thanks for reading and commenting, and hope ur doing well!

When Your Breaking Point's All That You Have

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: eating disorders, referenced self-harm, referenced panic attacks, past suicide attempts, and crying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd and Neil smack right into each other, one entering the room and one leaving it. Both looking for each other.

"Neil!"

"Todd!"

"I swear I didn't mean to freak out-"

"I'm so sorry I wasn't answering-"

"I just wanted to talk to you-"

"I was so scared to talk to you-"

"But I shouldn't have pushed you."

"But I'm ready to talk now."

They stand there a minute, looking at each other. They're both worried about the other, worried what they're trying to say will hurt things more than heal them, but knowing this conversation is one that needs to be had. Those are always the worst ones. The scariest.

Neil figures he ought to start it off. "It's something I do when I mess up. I punish myself by not eating. And I know it's fucked up, I know, but it just comes naturally at this point. I'm scared to stop."

Todd bites his lip. "So it's another type of your self-harm?"

"Kind of? I- I guess. It's different, though. I don't do it to make myself feel better. I, uh, I do it to, you know... Feel worse."

"Oh. Oh."

Todd looks so hopelessly lost that Neil wants to skip even the smallest snacks for a week. Then he's imagining what Todd would look like if he said that. Then he feels a million times worse.

"Well," Todd says after a moment, "We'll handle it. Figure it out. Just like everything else, okay?"

Neil wants to say, "No. Not okay. You're taking away every single thing that makes me feel like I can be alive and okay and you never even asked me!" Instead, he says, "Okay."

There. That's out of the way. Confession down. Heart-to-heart complete. Worries calmed. Except they're not. Neil can see in Todd's eyes that they're not. There's something else to be addressed.

"Todd?"

"Yes?"

"Do you... Want to talk about your attack. Or, can I ask what it was about?"

Todd pales considerably.

"You don't have to! It's completely up to you. Just. This relationship isn't just about me and my problems, you know? I want to take care of you too."

He sighs and flops down on the bed, face into the pillow. Neil lays down beside him, wrapping an arm around him. Todd curls into him immediately, tucking his head under Neil's chin. Neil crosses a leg over Todd's and uses one hand to card through his hair. The other hand closes around Todd's and rests on his stomach. This is their favorite position, no matter who's where.

That's the one downside of their relationship. Two little spoons, and no big spoon.

Todd mumbles something Neil can't hear, so he shifts ever so slightly, just enough for his arm to not muffle Todd's mouth.

"What'd you say, love?"

He repeats himself faintly. " 'M worried about you."

"You don't need to be."

"But I AM. You're not taking care of yourself, baby. And I don't wanna see you hurt."

Neil brushes Todd's bangs out of his face. "I'm not."

"No, but you are! Always. And it scares me. Really, really badly."

He can feel his heart clench, but Todd isn't done.

"I just want to help you, but I- I never know how! And I'm trying, really trying, but I'm not enough. I am not enough!"

"Hey, breathe..."

"I just- I keep thinking back to the night of the play, and how sad everyone looked, and how cold the hospital was, and how different and dull and DEAD you looked, all covered up in tubes and wires, and I thought I'd never get to hold you again, and I- I-"

Todd buries his head in Neil's chest, crying quietly. One of Neil's hands squeezes Todd's, and the other rubs up and down his back. "It's okay, Todd, it's okay." But it's not. He knows it's not.

This isn't a good relationship. Todd's good, being with Todd is good. Making Todd feel this way, however, is not good, and Neil knows it. And it terrifies him.

Todd promised he'd be there for him, through everything, no matter what. He laid with Neil in that hospital bed, held him tight, and promised he wasn't alone. Neil doesn't want to give up the feeling of safety and comfort and love. Neil doesn't want to be alone.

Todd's breathing slows down, but his head stays close to Neil, who continues stroking it. It's quiet for a few minutes. They're just touching each other. Talking won't make either of them feel much better. However, talking still needs to happen.

"I'm sorry," Todd says. "I don't want to make you feel bad."

Neil shakes his head. "You're not," He lies. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"It's okay. It's okay."

"Is it?"

"I don't really know."

They hold each other tighter. Uncertainty washes over them and nearly sweeps them away. But they stay together.

"Are you?"

Neil looks at him. "Am I what?"

"Okay?"

Is he? He has absolutely no idea. He always tells people he is, if they ask. Or sometimes, even if they don't, just to prove a point. He always tells himself he is, or at least, that he needs to be. But is he really, truly okay?

"I don't really know either."

Todd nods against his neck, seemingly satisfied with the answer. He figures it's the truth, at least. Neil never answers that question truthfully. "Oh. Okay." He presses himself closer to Neil's body. Oh, yeah. Todd's definitely going to have to be the little spoon tonight.

"Tired?"

He hums. "Little bit."

"Sleep, then."

"Only if you do too."

Neil rests his head on top of Todd's and breathes in and out. "Okay."

Todd falls asleep almost instantly. Right before he does, he tucks his head down, and whispers so quietly Neil thinks he wasn't intended to hear, "I'm sorry I'm not enough."

The words send a chill down his spine. This is because Neil knows Todd is right. Todd isn't enough. But that's not his fault. And it's not Neil's either. It's no one's fault, expect maybe this Goddamn hormonal imbalance that's constantly screwing with his brain.

The fact of the matter is, Todd is not enough. Neil needs more. Todd can't keep tearing himself apart with worry, only for Neil to worry about him worrying. This game of theirs isn't working. It's unhealthy. Neil needs someone else.

Neil doesn't fall asleep. He tries, honestly, but he can't be sleeping. He has something to do.

~~~

Mr. Keating answers the door, of course. He always does. Neil has no idea when this man sleeps, but a small, selfish part of him is grateful he doesn't. God knows these 2AM tea and vent sessions have saved his life more than once. In fact, Mr. Keating doesn't even blink when he sees Neil's face, as tired and teary as it is. He just opens the door wider.

Neil trails in and sits. Keating brews tea, pours them both a cup, and sits down across from him. Neil's hands are in his lap, fiddling with a loose thread on his sweater.

"Neil. What's up?"

"Do you know any good therapists nearby?"

Chapter End Notes

The boyyyy!! Takin steps to recovery!! 🎉🎊🎉
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What Else Could I Do?

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: guns, religion mention, emotional abuse, gaslighting, negative/dismissive talk of mental illness, discussion of suicide, arguing/yelling, threatened physical abuse, and crying.
>
> This one gets a bit heavy so please be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's hand wraps around the gun, and looks at it a moment. Feels the trigger underneath his finger.

"Perry?"

His head jerks up, and he eases into a smile. "Sorry, Jess."

Jess laughs. "No worries. Just looked like you were entering another dimension or somethin'."

"Just... Getting into character, I guess."

He smiles. "I get that. Speaking of, am I the only one who thinks we killed the first classroom scene?"

"We definitely did." He smirks a bit, and adds, "Herr Gabor."

"Ugh, don't do that! Feels weird."

Neil laughs, and a voice yells. "Hurry up with the props, guys! Mr. Kestner wants us in the seats for final notes!"

Jess groans, and Neil bumps his shoulder. "C'mon. Don't make her mad."

He puffs his chest out. "Tammy doesn't scare me."

"She should. She built half of these sets. That means she knows how to work with power tools."

Ginny comes up, thwacking his shoulder. "God, you guys are taking forever!" She reaches for the gun in Neil's hand, and his fingers wrap tighter around it.

"Neil?"

"Huh? Oh!" He releases the gun, shaking his head. "Sorry. Zoned out for a minute."

"Right..." She sets the gun down on the prop table, and takes his hand. "Let's go."

Jess gasps. "Hey, Danburry, what about me?"

"Put your dumbass letter away and come on, then." She pulls his hand, leading him away. "You okay, Neil?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Dunno. You seemed weird today."

"Just thinking about break, I guess."

"Oh. Okay."

Once everyone's seated, Mr. Kestner clasps his hands together.

"Alright. Today was a damn good rehearsal, I believe. We've still got things to tweak, of course, but we're on our way. I've already given you guys your individual notes for the day, so the last thing to address: spring break. I expect you all to be reading these scripts like the Bible, you hear me?"

He waits for the round of "yes, sirs" before continuing.

"Make sure you're running songs, listen to the CD! I'm keeping all costumes and props here, and yes, Shayanne, that includes Wendla's dress. I don't care how much you like it, if I let you take it home it would come back black instead of white."

She pouts, but nods.

"Alright. All that being said... Have a good break! Enjoy the rest, because the minute we come back we've only got a few rehearsals before launching straight into tech week, and for all my newbies: it's hell. That's all I've got for you. Pack up."

Neil grabs his bag, and Ginny nudges him. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes, Gin. I'm fine."

She chews her lip, but nods. He smiles at her, and after a moment, she smiles back.

"Listen, if your parents... I mean, if you need a place to stay..."

"I know. Thanks." He smiles.

"No prob. Call me later?"

"Will do."

The walk back is torture, and he finds himself fidgeting with the strap on his bag just to give his brain something to focus on. Somehow, despite having known for a while that this was something he needed to do, the idea of actually doing it... It's terrifying.

It's not even the idea of therapy, he figures. It's what has to happen first.

He enters Welton and heads up to the room, throwing his bag onto his bed with a flourish.

"How was rehearsal?" Todd asks.

"It was good."

"That's good."

It's been a quiet few days for them. Not necessarily awkward or tense, just... Just quiet. Nervous.

"You know I'm really proud of you for doing this," Todd says softly.

"I know. Thanks."

"I think it will help a lot. It helps me, at least."

Neil looks down. "Yeah. I hope so."

"Me too."

Neil bites his lip a moment before getting up and sitting next to Todd. Todd leans into him instantly.

"How are you feeling about your parents?"

"Not good," He admits. "But it has to happen."

"Maybe they'll surprise you." Todd sits up to look at him. "I know your father probably won't like it, but maybe he'll at least let you try?"

"Maybe."

Todd hums. "It's worth a try, at least."

"It is," Neil agrees. "I just wish there was a way for me to get therapy without them."

"You're sixteen, baby."

"I know, I know. It sucks."

"It definitely does."

"But maybe you're right," Neil says. "Maybe they'll surprise me. And it won't just be a quick call or anything. They'll have a week to think on it."

Todd nods.

"I'm sure it'll go better than I think."

"Exactly."

~~~

"Absolutely not." His father stomps up the staircase, hand clenched tightly.

Neil is quick to follow him. "Father, at least consider it!"

"You have no need. I'm not going to waste my hard-earned money so some quack can diagnose you with 'being dramatic'!"

"It's more than that!"

"Don't raise your voice at me!"

Neil lets out a growl. "Well, you're not even listening to me!"

He whips around. "You're not a child, Neil. It's time to grow up and take responsibility for yourself! Do not blame this on something else."

"It's not blame! I think I'm-"

"What?! What, Neil?! You think you're depressed? What do you have
~~~

to be depressed about?"

Neil can feel tears building in his eyes, and he hates it. "I don't know! But there's something wrong with me!"

"Oh for God's sake, I could have told you that! You've always had something wrong with you. Maybe if you were to stop whining and put in the effort..."

"I am! I am TRYING, Dad!" Tears start flowing down his cheeks. "This is me trying to get help! I don't want to be like this! You think you hate this?! I don't like it either! I want to get better, but how am I supposed to if you won't even admit I have a problem?!"

"You do NOT have a problem! Now you need to calm down and be respectful before I smack you."

Neil clenches his fists. "You don't scare me anymore! What are you going to do, sir? The same shit you've done since I was a kid? I don't care! I'm tired of living my life like this!"

Mr. Perry looks at him, jaw locked. "You are fine."

"I tried to shoot myself!"

Mrs. Perry lets out a soft gasp at that, at the same time Mr. Perry huffs. "You need to stop being ridiculous."

His face darkens. "You know that's what happened. I don't care what you told the hospital, or the teachers- you know. Are you seriously going to keep denying it?"

"I don't care what-"

"Well, when are you going to start caring? Next time? When I don't miss? When the ambulance doesn't come in time? When I actually die?"

His mother runs to grab his hand. "Darling, please-"

"I cannot control myself! I-I'm fucked in the head, alright?" He squeezes his eyes shut. "I don't think I can trust myself anymore. Not without some kind of help. I'm going to end up bleeding out in a bathtub, whether I want to or not! I am fighting every bone in my body right now, asking for help, because I'm terrified to change the way I live! I'm terrified I'm going to have to stop doing all these things

I've been doing. But I'm even more afraid of what's going to happen if I don't!"

"Neil..."

"I know you want me to suck it up and pretend I'm fine, and I- I've been trying to. I've tried for years to. I WANT to. But I can't- I can't do this anymore..." Neil tilts his head down, and sobs.

He can hear his father sigh. "Neil..."

"Stop, Tom."

Neil looks up.

"Eleanor-"

His mother runs over, wrapping an arm around him. Neil nestles into it, crying harder. "Look at him, Tom. Stop yelling for two seconds and look at our son."

He's silent.

Gently, she helps Neil up, and murmurs, "Go upstairs, sweetheart. Your father and I need to talk, alright? Just go calm down."

Wordlessly, he goes.

Chapter End Notes

> Hoo boy. This one hit a lil close to home. But if you think THIS one hurt, wait until next chapter! Let's just say we're uhhh getting a new POV...
>
> As always, thank you all endlessly for reading, commenting, and giving support. Seeing everyone's reactions to this fic makes my day <3. Hope y'all are doing well!

I Say It Runs In The Family

Chapter Notes

Mrs. Perry P.O.V. Time 👀

Another really heavy chapter here. Please heed the warnings on this one.

Warnings for: Descriptions of emotional abuse/neglect of a child, depression, gaslighting, ableism, sexism/double standards, self-deprecation, injury, toxic masculinity, generational trauma, dismissed mental illness, crying, yelling, implied self-harm, and mentioned suicide.

Just... Some real rough stuff in general. Stay safe lovelies

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil Edward Perry is the most beautiful thing Eleanor has ever seen. He's a light little child, only 5 pounds, with chubby cheeks and bright brown eyes. He looks so much like his father, she thinks, but Tom insists he looks like her.

He gazes down at the grinning baby, and chuckles.

"Oh, he's got you laughing. Must be a miracle."

Tom just shakes his head, a smile tugging at his lips. "Now, don't go getting used to it."

She laughs. "Just born and he's already got you wrapped around his finger. What a stern father you'll be."

"We'll see."

She shifts to sit up, holding out her arms. "Well, don't hog him, dear. I gave birth to him."

Tom places him in her arms, and... Oh. Little Neil, her Neil, lets out a gurgley laugh.

Her husband leans down. "What are you so happy about, then?"

"He's going to be a mischief-maker, I'll bet."

"Not a chance. You hear me?" He points a finger at Neil, who reaches out and grabs it. Instantly, Tom's face softens.

Eleanor places a soft kiss to her baby's forehead, and he gurgles again.

Neil. Her little ray of sunshine.

~~~

And oh, he is. He's an absolute angel, so sweet that the ladies in the garden club get jealous. And he's an emotional thing, quick to cry if he's not held, and while it soon starts to wear on Tom, she never complains, only picks him up and holds him until he settles again.

She doesn't sleep much, but she never has, really. Eleanor finds her mind troubled far too often, though she knows it's nothing a smoke and some deep-cleaning can't fix.

Tom, unfortunately, is not so used to the long nights.

"Don't."

Eleanor pauses at the edge of the bed, one slipper on. "Don't what?"

Neil's crying again. Screaming, more like.

"Don't get up."

"He's crying."

Tom huffs, reaching out a hand to settle on her shoulder. "And if you hold him every time he cries, what'll that do? It will teach him that crying gets him his way. "

She looks longingly. "I can't just leave him."

"He needs to learn."

"He's only a few months, Tom."

"If you want him to grow, you can't coddle him. Lay back down. He'll calm down soon enough. "

Eleanor hesitates, reluctant, but she hates to argue with Tom. Slowly, she lays back down, allowing him to wrap an arm around her. He falls asleep quickly.
~~~

Neil, however, stays up all night.

And so does she.

~~~

It's the third day in a row that Eleanor simply cannot get out of bed, and she feels terrible.

It had been going so well. Darling Neil was just reaching 10 months, and Eleanor hadn't been fantastic, not necessarily, but better than she had been in years.

Tom is confused. Ever since they were young, Tom had never understood. He'd been concerned, and empathetic, but he just didn't understand why Eleanor would miss days of school.

Eleanor doesn't quite understand either. Once, in high school, she asks her mother, who smiles and gives her daughter a ruffle of the hair. "We all have our quiet days, baby girl. Even me."

"What about Dad?"

Her mother pauses, then shakes her head with a small laugh. "It's a girl thing. We're more sensitive, you know. My mother used to get so down when I was younger, I practically had to raise my siblings and I. The trick is to force yourself through it."

"How?"

"Just keep that smile on, Ellie. Even if it's pretend. Eventually, it won't be pretend anymore."

Soon after, her mother's sympathy stops. She's much more forceful, but Eleanor doesn't complain. Her mother knows what's best.

"Eleanor?"

"I can't," She looks up at Tom, a sad look on her face. "I just can't."

Tom huffs. "Come on, now. You hardly left the bed yesterday. I have work."

"I can't, Tom."

"I have to work late tonight. I cannot take another day off. We're low on money as it is. Do you want our son to grow up with a good life or
~~~

not?"

She feels tears gather in her eyes, and oh, she loathes herself for putting her family through this. She's a selfish wife, a selfish mother.

Tom checks his watch, letting out a groan. "I have to go. Sleep another 15 minutes, if you need to."

She nods. It's smart. Practical. Tom always tries to help her.

He kisses her cheek, the practiced spousal peck, and leaves. Eleanor's head hits the pillow soonafter, and the next time she wakes up, Tom is curled into her side. She checks the clock, and it's 3 in the morning. She shakes her head, still dazed, and passes right back out.

Two weeks later, she realizes she never fed Neil that day.

~~~

"Neil! I'm not going to say it again. You are causing a scene."

Neil's lip trembles, tears still pouring down his face. "Daddy, hurts!"

"Well, that's what you get for fooling around like that! Pull yourself together. We are in public."

Eleanor gazes around the park. Most of the children are content to continue playing, but many of the parents are glancing their way, clearly concerned.

Neil lets out a sob, and Tom's voice turns firm. "Neil Edward Perry. You need to stop."

"It hurts!"

"It's a scraped knee. It will heal."

Neil's eyes shimmer, more tears threatening to fall, and Tom leans in.

"Boys don't cry, you understand me? You are going to tough it out."

He nods, muffling a sob with his hand, and Tom pats his shoulder. "Good. Come on. We're leaving." He starts, not bothering to wait for them to follow. Neil stays curled up under the slide.

Eleanor crouches down, pushing the hair from his eyes. "Come on, baby. We'll fix it at home."
~~~

"Hurts."

"I know, sweetheart. But your father and I are really stressed right now. I need you to be a big boy for me, okay? Can you do that? Be my little sunshine?"

Neil ducks his head, crying harder, but he nods.

"There's my baby. Come on out from under there, alright?"

He does, taking her hand and following her to the car.

"There you are," Tom says. "Neil, we've still got your 5 problems to do when we get home, you hear me?"

A mumbled "uh huh" follows.

"That's my son."

Eleanor smiles at him, and mouths, "Thank you".

He's just under four years, but he's so wise for his age. The glue that's keeping their boat afloat. And even though she's sure it's wrong, she can't help but be grateful that Neil seems to understand just how much he helps by being their happy little child.

~~~

She knocks on the door, and waits until she hears a cheerful "come in!"

"Everything okay in here?"

"Yes ma'am!" Charlie grins wide, two loose teeth showing, and she smiles at the sight.

"Well, I'm glad. Neil, baby, did you do your work like your father asked?"

"Yep!"

"Good boy. I'm about to make dinner if you two want to help me choose what I make."

The boys exchange a look before nodding and dashing towards the kitchen.
~~~

"No running, please!"

They're waiting patiently, and she gives them a smile. "Alright, now I think I bought chicken nuggets the other day... Charlie, Neil says you like those?"

"Yep, but I'll eat anything!"

"Well, I thought I'd make something good since you're our guest. I just need to-" She freezes as her hand wraps around the fridge's door handle. "Oh my God. I forgot to go shopping for this week." A hand runs through her hair. "How did I...?"

"It's okay, Mama!" Neil stands on his tiptoes, opening the door to reveal a fully stocked fridge.

"What? How?"

Neil runs back to his room, coming back with a slightly crumpled receipt. "I went to Mrs. Katie next door and asked her to go shopping with me yesterday! I saw we were out of ketchup, and I figured you and Dad were busy, so I got that emergency money from my room and went myself!" He puffs his chest out, full of pride.

Eleanor just stares.

"Mama?"

She blinks a moment, before smiling at Neil incredulously. "You're a smart boy, you know that?"

Neil beams at the praise as Charlie bumps his shoulder, just as excited for him.

"Now then. We were making chicken nuggets, I believe?"

~~~

"Neil!"

He pops his head in, face full of worry, and she can't help the frustrated huff that escapes her.

"How many times do I have to ask you to rinse your plate when you put it in the sink?!"

After a moment, Neil's eyes go wide. "I'm sorry, Mom! I completely
~~~

forgot."

She groans. "I've told you a million times. You did not forget. You're acting lazy. It's two extra seconds, Neil. Just take the time to do it right."

"I swear I didn't mean to. I just- I forgot."

Eleanor has never understood her parents more. When she was little, she loathed her parents' punishments, insisting something was wrong. Now, she finds herself repeating what her father always said.

"Oh right, you can't remember this one simple thing, yet you remember every character in those books I've bought you?" He looks down, guilty, and she closes her eyes before continuing. "I'm taking them. Now. You'll get your things back once you start doing what you're told."

Neil's eyes flood with tears. "But Mom, I- I swear I didn't mean to! I forgot! I didn't mean to forget!"

Tom comes in just then. "What is going on in here?"

Eleanor gestures to the sink.

"Neil, how many times do we have to tell you this?"

"I didn't-"

"Don't talk back to me." He massages the bridge of his nose. "And for God's sake, stop crying."

She sighs, and turns to leave. Her heart can't take seeing Neil cry, even if he is in trouble. Honestly, she can't believe she yelled at Neil like that at all. "Rinse your plate, please." She goes, and hears Tom follow behind her.

"I don't know what's gotten into him."

"He gets it from me. My memory's always been terrible. My attention, too. My whole brain's shot." She shakes her head.

"Well, how did you stop it?"

"My mother made sure I stopped making excuses. He'll learn, Tom. Eventually."

She hopes he will. He'll be better than her.

It's a wish she and Tom have always shared. Neil will be better than they were.

He has to be.

~~~

"Darling, take off your sweater."

"Hm?"

"It's summer. You're acting like you're freezing."

He ducks his head down. "It's just... The heaters in Welton were down. So, it feels colder than normal, I suppose."

She frowns. "If you say so."

"You have your work for the break?" Tom asks.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I've signed you up for summer school as well."

Eleanor sees his face fall, but he nods diligently. She hesitates.

"You're sure about the sweater, Neil? I could change the thermostat, if you need."

"I'm okay, Mother." He smiles at her, and stands. "I'm going to go unpack, if that's okay?"

Tom waves him off. "Call if you need help."

"I will."

She gasps. "Oh, Neil! Helena called, said Gerard told her you all were trying to get together later this month? I went ahead and made plans for you."

"Eleanor, are you sure that's best?" Tom glances at their son. "I'd hate for him to get behind."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be fine. Besides, you boys do that study group anyway, don't you?"
~~~

He nods quickly. "We'll make sure to study while I'm there, Father."

"Alright then."

"Thank you, sir." He looks up at Eleanor, and gives a tiny, giddy smile. "Thanks, Mother."

Something doesn't sit right with her. Numbly, she realizes that's the first time Neil's given her a real, genuine smile since... Oh, God. Since she doesn't even know how long. It's nice to see, of course it is, but Jesus, didn't Neil's smile used to be much bigger?

Her worry must show, because Neil's smile gets wider, but a part of her wonders... It seems much, much faker. But no, he leaves and it looks more genuine, maybe. Maybe? She can't stop herself from wondering when she stopped being able to tell Neil's fake smiles from his real ones.

~~~

Neil is in the hospital.

Neil has been shot.

Neil has shot himself.

Tom tells her it is an accident, and so she believes it.

Neil tells her he is alright, and so she believes it.

She knows she is living in a house of liars, and that she is the worst one of all, but then she tells herself that they just need to try a little harder, and everything will be fine. She needs that to be true, and so she believes it.

She knows she should tell her husband to go easy on their poor, sweet child, but she hates confrontation. She hates to cause a scene. So, she stays quiet.

She knows she should tell her son that he needs to be honest with them, to tell them what's on his mind, but she hates confrontation. She hates to cause a scene. So, she stays quiet.

Eleanor will stay quiet, and caring, and happy, and calm, and smart, and attentive, and well-behaved, and seen-and-not-heard until the day she dies.
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She wonders if her silence will cost her son's life.

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Eleanor hates confrontation. Loathes it.

Then, she decides she hates seeing her son cry more.

~~~

Neil's in his room, cheeks still tear-stained, but visibly calmer. She sits down beside him, cautious. He looks up at her, and she can clearly see he's tired. So tired, and she has no clue how she could have never noticed how tired her baby always looks.

"Your father and I talked things over. We think therapy is a very good idea for you."

His voice is still hoarse. "What?"

"Well, your father doesn't. But I do. I think it's very important. And I made sure he's going to go along with it, alright?"

Neil looks at her, terribly confused, and she squeezes his hand.

"Neil... Baby, I... I'm so proud of you for doing this. For finding out what you need, and telling us. And... And I'm so sorry you had to." She cups his cheek and smiles sadly. "You shouldn't have had to do this alone. You never should've. And I'm so sorry I never stood up for you earlier. I- I've made a lot of mistakes with you, baby."

Neil opens his mouth, and she shakes her head.

"No, I have. I know I have. You know, you- you remind me so much of me when I was your age. And I... I had such a hard time growing up. I think I was scared of that. I didn't want you to have to go through everything I went through, and I thought if we could nip it all in the bud..."

She looks at him, and her heart breaks.

"But I've just made everything worse, haven't I? You're stronger and braver than I ever was, sweetheart. Your father and I, we've put you through so much. But look at you. You're still trying. I- I was never able to do that. You know, I... I gave up on trying to feel better. I thought it was just something I'd have to live with. But Neil, darling..."

She starts crying, and lifts a hand to wipe the tears away.

"You deserve so much better than that, my love. You deserve better than living. You deserve to thrive. I want you to have everything your father and I never did. I want you to be happy." She sighs. "So we'll do the therapy. Therapy, medication, a break from school... It doesn't matter to me. Whatever it's gonna take to make you happy, baby. Whatever it takes. It's worth it for you, you understand me? You are worth it."

She pulls him into a hug, and Neil weeps. And for the first time, she doesn't try to stop him. Doesn't tell him to chin up and smile. She just sits there and holds him while he cries. And whenever he's done, she's going to be there.

She's going to be there.

She has to be.

Chapter End Notes

Alright so I think this fic is officially middle-fingering the canon (like this chapter is so out if nowhere) but uhhh hopefully y'all enjoyed this regardless lmao

Came out a lot heavier than I intended, whoops??

Does It Almost Feel Like Nothing's Changed At All?

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: mentions of suicide, depression, and anxiety, discussion of therapy, referenced fire, and slight ableism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Please list any and all symptoms below, along with your reason for visiting and what you would like to get out of counseling.

Well, Neil has no fucking clue what to put for that. He taps the end of his pencil against the clipboard, groaning quietly. They've given three lines to write, as if that's even close to enough. What's he supposed to put? 'I want to off myself'? 'I'd like to stop wanting to off myself'?

He chews on his lip a moment before beginning to write. 'Suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression'. A million other things, too, but he isn't supposed to write down everything, is he? Just the basics?

He's pretty sure those are all the basics. Well, kind of sure, at least.

Neil looks up and glances around the waiting room. There's a young... girl? Maybe? He shouldn't assume... A young kid, with bright blue hair cut short, fidgeting with their jacket zipper while they talk to who he assumes is their father. There's what looks like a married couple, a fairly young man and woman, filling out the same papers as he is, holding hands anxiously. And there's an older woman who came in with another woman, but she'd gone back about half an hour earlier. Now, this woman was just reading a book.

Neil's the only one who came in by himself.

But it's fine. He didn't want anyone to come. It's fine.

He looks back down. Symptoms or reasons for visiting...

"Neil Perry?"

He jumps up, and the clipboard of papers clatters to the floor. He sees the blue-haired kid flinch out of the corner of his eye, the dad leaning forward to reassure them. Flushing, he picks it back up and hands it over to the woman waiting.

"Sorry."

"It's not a problem. Ready to head back?"

He nods.

"Ginny," Tammy barks. "Stop biting her face off and get into fucking costume!"

Neil looks up, pulled out of his thoughts.

Ginny pulls away from Chris with a pout. "Sorry, doll. The show must go on." She hops up and runs off, and Neil turns to Chris with a chuckle.

"She's a bit dramatic, huh?"

Chris laughs. "You're telling me. You should hear the way she used to talk about Chet- as if he burns down orphanages in his free time."

"I've never heard her talk about him," Neil admits, "But I've heard her roast Knox for a good twenty minutes, so."

Chris nods. "How's he been? Knox, I mean?"

"Pretty good."

"That's great! How about the rest of the guys?"

"Doing well," He nods.

"That's good. You know, I..." Chris turns and freezes.

"Chris?" Neil follows her line of sight.

Ginny is walking over, fully costumed. She takes a seat between them, smiling. "Everything okay, Chrissy?"

Chris goes scarlet. "Uh huh."

Ginny smirks a bit, then winks. "Think the costume suits me, then? Maybe you ought to take a picture. I hear that makes it last longer."

She blushes darker, elbowing Ginny. "Shut up!"

Ginny cackles, eyes lit up. Neil grins, watching the scene with high

entertainment.

"I just think the dress is nice, that's all." Chris ducks her head down, smiling softly.

"Just wait until you hear me sing," Ginny says eagerly, then turns to Neil. "She's never heard me sing before."

"Really?"

"Yep!"

Chris shakes her head fondly. "She insisted on waiting until today so I can be surprised."

Neil smiles. "That's sweet."

"Now, I just have to cross my fingers I don't suck."

"You do not suck, Gin! I saw you in Midsummer, you were amazing!"

"You just have to say that 'cause you're my girlfriend."

"Oh, hush, you're going to be great." Chris smiles at Neil. "I'm excited to see you act, too. You were great as uh... Pat?"

Ginny laughs. "Puck, babe."

"Well, it's not my fault Shakespeare names are weird!"

Ginny shakes her head. "I'll teach you eventually."

"Mm, I'm sure."

Neil chuckles. "But it's cool Mr. Kestner let you come watch rehearsal, Chris."

"I know, right? Ginny asked and he was totally chill with it."

"I'm kinda surprised."

Ginny shrugs. "He said it makes for good practice, mini audience and all that."

"That makes sense."

Ginny nods, then lets out a gasp. "Neil, oh my God! You should tell Todd to come Friday!"

Neil tilts his head, considering the idea. "You think so?"

"Totally! Right, Chris?"

She nods quickly. "You could invite all your friends, really! That Dead Poets Society group, right?"

Neil smiles a bit. "Yeah. Yeah, that's not a bad idea! They do keep asking how the show's coming along. And they don't wanna wait any longer. But that could be really cool..."

"You should ask Kestner, then!"

"Yeah. I think I will."

"Guys! Starting from the top of act one in 5!"

Neil jumps up. "Ah shit, I gotta get my coat on. Talk to you after, Chris?"

"Sure thing!"

Ginny nudges him. "Ready to see if I mess up the end of Blue Wind again?"

"You won't," He assures. "See you in a few!"

Neil runs off, pulling the coat on and getting into position behind the curtain. As the first song starts up, he's already planning what to say to Mr. Kestner.

He can see Chris watching in the audience, awestruck, and he can't help but imagine the Todd, Charlie, Knox, Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron looking like that. Looking at him, doing what he loves, like that. Like he's a normal person.

He smiles to himself. He's been in therapy for almost a month now, and it's actually... going better than he thought it would. The show is premiering in less than two weeks, and he's completely memorized. Maybe this is his chance to finally get things back on track. Maybe he's finally getting over this stupid slump.

The girls finish singing, and he runs onstage with the rest of the guys. He shakes his head, forcing himself to get into character. He's got this.

Chapter End Notes

lightly sprinkles two wlw couples and a nonbinary person into this chapter I do it for the girls and the gays that's it-

Wow wow wow. Sorry this chapter took a MONTH. Basically, this chapter was supposed to be just Neil's therapy session, and next chapter would be the gals at rehearsal, but for whatever reason, I could n o t get the scene written. What you see at the beginning of the chapter is all I was able to write :/

Hopefully, I'll be able to get that written and maybe fit it in as a flashback chapter at a later point, but it didn't feel fair to make you guys wait any longer for this chapter. Either way, we'll be meeting Neil's therapist in later chapters, so don't worry!

Anywho, hope you all enjoyed this chapter 💕

Talk Of The Way They Saw Him Last

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: referenced harassment, heavy suicide (including a small scene of Neil's character in the play killing himself), guns, mentioned panic attacks, and crying.
>
> Also spoilers for Spring Awakening, I guess?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil is practically bouncing on the heels of his feet as he leads his friends to the theatre.

"You're like a fucking puppy," Cameron says with an eye roll, though there's no real anger behind it.

Pitts snorts. "That's an understatement."

"Hey Neil?"

Neil glances back at Knox. "Hm?"

"Do you think Chris'll be there?"

The group immediately comes to life.

"Knox, oh my God-"

"Simp of the century-"

"Way to miss the point of this-"

"Leave her alone, man-"

Knox raises his hands in defense. "I'm not gonna bother her! I just want to apologize again for the way I acted."

"You should make an apology video," Charlie laughs.

"I don't know if she'll be there," Neil says, "But if she is, and you go near her, I'm pretty sure Ginny will kill you."

Everyone cracks up at that, all except Knox, who pouts. "I'm being sincere, guys!"

Neil gives him an exaggerated frown. "And here I thought you came to see me perform."

Knox nudges him. "C'mon, you know I did!"

"Good, because you are not going to be disappointed."

Charlie raises an eyebrow. "Ooh, cocky, are we?"

"Just wait until you see the show." Neil stops at the door to the building, pulling it open. "Enter!"

They practically run in, full of excitement. Immediately, everyone is shouting a question at him, too quickly for Neil to answer a single one, other than a "No, Knox, Chris isn't here". It's complete and utter chaos.

He couldn't be happier.

"Alright, alright, settle down," Mr. Kestner says, not unkindly. "Neil, come on and get into costume."

"We're running from the top," Ginny yells.

"I'd like to get through the reprise of The Word of Your Body, but honestly, we'll be lucky if we get to Act Two today. Let's see what we can do, alright?" Everyone speaks in agreement, and Mr. Kestner nods. "Good. Let's get going, then."

Neil makes sure they're seated, then rushes to get ready.

The show starts, and Neil forces himself to forget about his friends and get into character. Luckily, he's had practice, so it isn't too difficult.

However, he can't resist sneaking a glance towards them when he's offstage. During My Junk, he sneaks a peak and is thrilled to see what looks like them thoroughly enjoying the show.

As they enter Act 2, right before Don't Do Sadness, Ginny gives him a wry smile and a wink, and Neil reads the message loud and clear. 'Let's show them what we've got.'

The scene goes without a hitch, the two feeding off of each other's energy as always. Ginny leaves the stage, and Neil- or Moritz, rather- is alone.

He takes the prop gun out from under his coat, and starts speaking,

perfectly memorized by now.

"For the love of God, all I had to do was say yes! Ilse? Ilse?!"

He turns to face the audience, but he doesn't bother to find a face, too engrossed in the scene to think about it.

"So, what will I say? I'll tell them all, the angels, that I got drunk in the snow. And sang. And played pirates. I'll tell them, I'm ready now. I'll be an angel."

He fingers the trigger of the gun, weighing it in his hands.

"Ten minutes ago, you could see the entire horizon. Now, only the dusk. The first few stars."

He lifts the gun to his head. "So dark. So dark. So dark..."

The gunshot sound plays, and he's offstage. Still full of adrenaline, he fights to resist pulling the curtain back to see his friend's faces. Did they like it? Were they impressed? Did he do well? He feels like it was one of the best runs he's done so far.

He sits backstage, listening to Alec sing. It's the funeral scene right now, where each of them lay a flower on Moritz's coffin. The first time they'd done the scene, Neil had cried. A lot. Now, though, he's used to it, instead taking the time to appreciate just how talented his co-stars are.

Once the song has ended, the lights come up. "Alright, we're gonna stop there. Great job, guys! Go ahead and pack up."

Instantly, Neil is rushing to get out of costume and offstage.

"Neil," He hears Ginny exclaim, right behind him.

"I know! We were on fire, weren't we? You so hit that final note, and I think I really hit the emotions for my monolouge! Don't you th-" He turns to Ginny, and freezes when he sees her face. She's pale as a ghost. "What's wrong?"

"You better go check on your friends. I... I think it was too heavy for them."

"What do you mean?" He looks past Ginny, and his heart drops.

Meeks is hyperventilating, hands covering his ears, while Pitts tries to

talk to him. Todd is cornered between and a teary Charlie and a sobbing Knox, both trying to keep him breathing. Cameron is backed away, looking terrified.

Ginny looks at him with wide eyes. "I'll tell Kestner you gotta skip notes, okay?"

Neil nods numbly, slowly approaching the group.

Cameron is the only one that seems to notice him, spinning around to face him.

"What the hell was that?" Cameron hisses.

"I don't..."

"This is what you've been doing? Jesus fuck, Neil! I- I can't believe you!" Cameron runs a shaky hand through his hair. "Seriously? What is this? I thought- WE thought you were trying to feel better! And then- this- and you invited us to come watch?!"

"I'm- I'm sorry, I didn't think-"

"To warn us?" He scoffs, though Neil can hear his voice shaking. "Yeah, Neil. We noticed."

Neil recoils as if he's been slapped. "I'm sorry," He says again, desperate.

Cameron casts a look towards the others. "Fuck. I have to help them." He turns back to Neil. "Just..... Just give some space. Finish your rehearsal. We'll see you back at Welton."

Cameron leads the others out, leaving Neil floundering for something to say.

He can't think of a single thing.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand the angst train has pulled into the station! Woo woo!

Sorry for ANOTHER long wait between chapters! I really don't have much of an excuse, online school has just been kicking my ass as of late. I promise next chapter will be up sooner, I've actually already started writing it.

As always, hope you're doing well and thanks so so much for reading!

Should I Be Good This Year?

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: therapy, discussion of suicide and arguments (the aftermath of last chapter), crying, self-deprecation, and emotional abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil sits on the couch, eyes stubbornly looking anywhere but Dr. Lauren's face. He likes her office quite a bit, actually. It's small, but in the homey way, not the claustrophobic way. There's a few paintings, some abstract with muted colors, and one of a field of cherry blossom trees. That one is his favorite, he's pretty sure.

Then, in the corner of the room, by the window, there's a bed where a small dog rests. The first session they'd had, Dr. Lauren had asked if he was okay with having a dog in the room while they talked, and Neil was eager to say yes. Apparently, her name is Abigail, and she has an affinity for jumping on patient's laps during sessions to snuggle. Dr. Lauren explains that she brings the dog to work because a lot of patients seem to benefit from her being there. Neil has to agree.

"So." Neil glances up. Dr. Lauren's smiling softly, not quite pity, but more genuine care and concern. "How are you doing?"

"Not too bad," Neil answers. Fucking hell.

She inclines her head, as Neil immediately knows what she's going to say. They've been over this one, many times.

"Really?" She asks. Not accusingly. Just skeptical.

Neil sighs. "No. Not really. Sorry." He rubs the back of his neck. "Force of habit."

"You don't need to apologize, Neil. It's perfectly okay. That's what we're here for, right?"

"Right."

"So. How are you really?"

He swallows. "Not... Not great. I, uh... Last Friday was really shitty.

And the aftermath, it's... It's been a rough couple days." He chuckles lightly. "It's been- uh, it's been real fun."

"Sarcasm?" She asks.

"Very much."

She nods. "What happened?"

And then Neil's launching into the full story, explaining everything in excruciatingly unnecessary detail, though Dr. Lauren doesn't rush him.

At some point, he starts crying, and Abigail leaps onto the couch and sits herself on Neil's lap, licking his hand when he gets choked up until he's able to catch his breath again.

"I just... It was such a stupid thing to do. I don't know what on Earth possessed me to do it. I should've known, I should've..."

"Should've been able to predict other people's reactions?" Dr. Lauren interrupts gently. "Not even I can do that."

"I should've known they'd get upset," He insists. "It's how anyone would react."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. But you didn't know, Neil. That's not something to get mad at yourself for, alright? It's something to keep in mind, to be careful of."

"I know, but... I hurt them. And I- all the rest of this week, I've been trying to fix it! I've been apologizing constantly, for being such an idiot, a burden, for being such an awful friend that I didn't even think about how they would react, because I was too selfish- caught up in getting excited about my stupid acting shit."

She frowns a bit, choosing her words carefully. "I'm not going to tell you that what happened didn't hurt them. I'm sure it did. And I do think an apology was called for. But it doesn't sound to me like you've really been apologizing to them."

Neil tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

"You've just been putting yourself down. That isn't a proper apology, Neil."

He sighs. "I know, I know, it's not good for me, but..."

"But it's not good for them, either," She says. "When you apologize like that- saying you're a burden or a terrible friend or an idiot- anything like that, all that's doing is making them feel bad. As if they shouldn't show they're hurt, because it's making you hurt. And it puts the burden on them to comfort you, instead of processing your apology."

Neil feels his throat go dry. "I... I've been hurting them even more?"

"I think so," She says, as gently as she can. "How do you feel about that?"

It's a common question, with Dr. Lauren. Basically a "how does that make you feel", something he's only ever heard people make fun of. Somehow, after experiencing the question first hand, he's much more appreciative of it. Dr. Lauren's always careful to ask how he feels, after dropping what Neil calls a 'truth bomb' like what she's just said. Sometimes, Neil has no idea how he feels. So, she steps in and helps him figure out.

Now, though, he doesn't hesitate before speaking. "Guilty. And- and confused."

"Guilty, because of what you've been doing?" She waits for him to confirm before continuing. "Why confused?"

"That's how I was always taught to apologize." Neil says it quietly, getting the feeling it's not something to be excited about. "I mean, with my father. He... I had to apologize a lot, around him. A lot. And when he'd yell, when he'd get angry with me, he always put me down. And so, when I apologized, I had to, too. Otherwise, he'd get even madder, saying that I didn't understand why I was in trouble. It calmed him down more if I said stuff like that- so he'd know I knew why he was disappointed in me." His swallows roughly, and reaches to pet Abigail, desperately trying to still his shaking hands.

Dr. Lauren frowns, and Neil knows. He knows, that it's not a healthy thing for a father to do. She doesn't say that, however, because she knows by now that Neil knows it too.

"And now..." Neil closes his eyes. "Now, I feel angry. Angry that... That this is just another way that he's screwed me up."

"You aren't screwed up, Neil."

"But now I've made a habit of it," He says quietly.

"Habits can be broken," She assures. "Now that you know, it's something you can work on."

Neil nods, slowly.

"Okay?"

"Okay." He sighs. "Okay. But- what do I do now? I mean, apologize. For real, this time. But... How do I get them to stop worrying?"

"You don't."

"I- what?"

She shrugs lightly. "You can't control other people's emotions, Neil."

And he knows that, of course, on the one hand. But on the other hand, he's Neil Perry, and making other people happy is his job, isn't it?

"I don't want them worried, though. They shouldn't be."

"But they are, Neil. They're worried because they're your friends, and they care about you. You've just attempted something very serious-"

"It was months ago."

"A couple months just isn't long enough to get over something like that. For them, or for you. And you're still in a state of crisis, Neil. That's something any friend would be concerned about."

"So, I can't stop it?" Neil hates himself for how desperate he sounds, but he can't help it. He is.

"There's a chance they're always going to worry, Neil."

"But I'm not going to try anything again!"

"That's not something you can promise. All you can promise to them is that you're trying. That you'll talk to them if you're feeling like that again."

He sighs. "Okay."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Not good," Neil says honestly.

"That's okay," Dr. Lauren says. "It's a hard thing to accept."

"Yeah..." He takes a deep breath.

It really is.

Chapter End Notes

This one's dedicated to MY therapist UwU

Look at the Perry boy!! Talkin about shit!! Growin as a person!! Hell yea!! Growth!!

Oh, This Might Take A While To Figure Out

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: self-deprecation, mentioned self harm, therapy, discussion of suicide, underage drinking, and mentioned violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil gathers them together in the cave and waits until they've sat down before he begins talking.

"I'm sorry." He's said it a million times in the past few days, yet the words still feel brand new on his tongue.

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"I apologize a lot," Neil tells her.

Dr. Lauren nods, waiting for him to continue.

"And I'm pretty sure after a while I start to sound like a broken record about it. I apologize for anything and everything. And I get the feeling that since I say it so much, it's starting to sound like I don't even mean it. I say I'm sorry constantly, and that invalidates the words, which is... Quite literally the last thing I want to do. I just have this..."

He sighs. "This overwhelming urge to apologize whenever I can. I want people to know, to be absolutely, 100% percent, without-a-doubt certain that I am. That- that I'm sorry for everything I've done. And everything I haven't. I need people to understand that- that everything's my fault. Because my friends- they don't see it. They think I'm this saint, and-" He grabs at his hair, pulling hard. "I'm not. I'm just not."

He doesn't wait for Dr. Lauren to react before continuing.

"I apologize constantly, even though I know it will never be enough. Nothing can excuse how useless and heartless and worthless and idiotic and pathetic I am. Nothing can change the fact that the only thing I'm good at is screwing up."

All Dr. Lauren says is a quiet, murmured, "Wow."

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"I'm sorry," He says again, shaking the memory from his mind. "It was stupid-" Neil takes a deep breath. Don't put yourself down when you apologize, he reminds himself. "It was wrong of me to not warn you about the play. Really wrong."

Meeks is already nodding. He opens his mouth to speak, but Neil rushes ahead.

"But- I need to say, upfront, I'm not quitting the play."

Their faces fall. Neil plows ahead.

"This is part of how I cope with everything- acting. And I know it doesn't seem like it, but it is not negative. It's healthy. And I know, you're going to try and talk me out of it, but my answer is no. It's... Cathartic for me, being able to do this." He takes a deep breath. "I am my own person and I am capable of making my own decisions."

"Neil," Cameron starts. "It's just going to make you feel worse-"

"I know you're just concerned, Cam, and I appreciate it, but you aren't my therapist. I have one of those, and she actually agrees that acting can be very therapeutic."

Todd sighs. "We're just worried, Neil."

"I know. But... The way we've been acting- it's not a healthy friendship. It's taking a toll on me, and I'm pretty sure it's taking a toll on you too. When you treat me like I'm fragile, it- it just makes me feel worse, you know? I just... How can I be better when everyday you act like I'm about to try and kill myself again?"

"It's terrifying to see you in that same situation again," Knox says after a moment. "To watch it happen- watch you fall apart- and have no way of stopping it."

Neil looks down. "I can't promise you I won't try again. I want to, so badly, but I can't. And... I doubt you'd believe me, even if I did. Not that I can blame you. But, can you just... Try to talk to me, when you're worried about me? Ask me how I'm doing, instead of finding all these subtle ways to babysit me?"

Charlie looks at him a moment. "We'll do that, if you promise to be open and honest with us when we ask. Even if you're doing shitty, just tell us. We want to help, but you... You won't let us in, Neil. If you need space... If you need us to back away, we will. But we don't know

unless you tell us."

"Okay," Neil says quietly. "Yeah. That's fair. I'm sorry."

"We forgive you," Pitts says. "And we're sorry too. All of us."

"I forgive you too. And- and you don't have to see the play, either, if you don't want to," He adds. "I'm doing it either way, but you don't have to see it-"

Todd shakes his head immediately. "I don't know about everyone else, but I want to." The group voices their agreement, and Todd continues, encouraged. "We want to see it, Neil. We just... Needed a warning beforehand."

Neil nods. "Of course."

"And I might- might need to step out for that scene. But I'm coming, Neil. Of course I am."

"How about I give you guys a full list of shit that happens before you do? Just so you know?"

Charlie barks out a laugh. "Yeah," He says, just a tad sarcastically. "Yeah, that would be fucking appreciated."

Neil can't help but chuckle with him, flushed.

Charlie elbows him. "Look at you, using big words and standing up for yourself."

"The wonders of DBT," Neil says.

Meeks snorts. "I'll drink to that."

Neil rolls his eyes fondly. "Oh yeah, with what?"

Charlie grins. "Actually..." He gets up, and comes back with a bottle of whiskey.

"Charlie, oh my god-"

"Seriously?"

"Where did you-"

Charlie huffs. "Come on! Let's live a little. We deserve a fucking break,

don't we?"

"We'll get in trouble for it," Cameron says.

"Not if you keep your mouth shut, Dicky."

They glare at each other for about a full minute, and for a moment, Neil isn't sure if they're going to punch each other or kiss. Then, Cameron yanks the bottle out of Charlie's hand and takes the first sip.

"Holy fuck," Pitts says.

Knox laughs. "WOO! Go Cameron!"

Cameron shoves the bottle back into Charlie's hand with a wry smirk. "Your turn, asshat."

Charlie grins. "Don't mind if I do." He does, then offers it to Neil.

"Our heads are going to be killing us tomorrow."

Everyone nods.

Neil shrugs. "Well, as long as we're all aware." He smiles and drinks.

Chapter End Notes

> The end of this chapter is dedicated to my friend, who after reading the first bit of this chapter said, and I quote, "This is some heavy ass shit. Are you giving them a break anytime soon?"
>
> They got a break, but remember kids, drink responsibly.
>
> Anywho, hope everyone enjoyed this chapter! As always, thank you so so much to everyone who leaves kudos, comments, bookmarks, or even just reads! You guys make my day everytime :) Hope you're taking care of yourselves, and see you next chapter, which will be the last one of what I consider to be "Act Two". Then, onto the third and final act!

We'll Steal Away To The Dawn

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: implied homophobia, discussion of what happened during rehearsals, suicide, and implied emotional abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They both agree that it's the quiet bus ride home that makes the evening. The date itself is wonderful, but the aftermath is always... Enchanting.

Ginny and Chris had been dating for a while, now. Neither of their families knew yet, so their relationship mostly consisted of sneaking out after school, kissing under park trees, trading jokes in cafes, and taking the bus home so their parents wouldn't suspect anything. That was fine, though. They were content with coming out when they were ready. No hurry.

That particular night, they took a bus almost an hour out of town to see a concert, some punk band Chris couldn't quite remember the name of. But Ginny was thrilled, singing along to every song at the top of her lungs, so Chris ended up grinning the entire time.

Now, since the band had been for Ginny, she'd insisted on letting Chris pick the music for the ride home. So, they each have an earbud plugged in, listening to some indie-pop-rock song.

Ginny taps Chris' knee, drawing her attention away from the window. "Chris?"

She hums in response.

"What's this song again?"

Chris lets out a faux gasp. "You're telling me that after months of borrowing my records, you don't recognize one of the most legendary songs in the world?"

"Not everyone's a nerd like you," Ginny teases.

"Oh, you're one to talk, Gin!"

Ginny grins.

"Dog Days Are Over. It's Florence + The Machine."

"Ohh. I like them."

"I do too," Chris says softly. "Not as much as I like you, of course."

Ginny kisses her cheek. "You flatter me."

Chris smiles, but after a moment, it fades.
"What's wrong?"

"Hm? Nothing."

"You know I don't believe that. You've been... Quiet." Chris bites her lip. "Are you nervous for the show tomorrow night?"

"No," Ginny says. "Well, a little. But that's not it."

"Then what is?"

Ginny looks down. "I'm just worried about Neil."

"Knox's friend? In the play?"

Ginny nods.

"Why? Did something happen?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

Chris frowns. "What do you mean?"

"He took his friends to see us rehearse the other day. Like we suggested, remember?" Chris nods. "But something happened."

"Yeah?"

"When we finished, I went to get my stuff. But his friends, they looked... I mean, they looked like they'd seen a ghost. Horrified. Some of them were crying."

Chris' eyebrows crease. "I mean, it's a pretty shocking show..."

"It isn't like that. They were fine, through everything else. But when Neil was acting, it all went south."

"Has Neil mentioned it? At all?"

Ginny shakes her head. "No. He didn't say a word. But I think... It had something to do with him acting?"

"Acting? What, are they homophobic or something?" Chris chuckles a bit, trying to lighten the mood, but Ginny just shakes her head.

"I don't know, but... When we were in Midsummer together? You remember opening night?"

Chris pauses a minute, then nods. "His dad came storming in, right? All mad."

"Yeah. Thing is, we had two more shows after that. Neil didn't show. De'andre had to step in and play Puck. But it was so sudden. And Neil LOVED acting, I know he did. Then, we get some note that he won't be showing and that's it. And I called, texted, but Neil wouldn't talk to me- or anyone- for weeks. Then, he finally calls me, and he sounds... Manic, almost. Raving about acting and performing again."

"That's... Weird. Have you asked him?"

"I've tried," Ginny insists, "But he keeps just making vague excuses or changing the subject. But something changed. I mean, Neil was always odd. We loved him for it- the cast and techies and band, I mean. But lately he always seems so off."

Chris thinks a moment. "Do you have any clue what might've happened? Anything about his dad?"

"I know Neil has a pretty rough relationship with him. That he disapproves of him a lot. But I think it's more than that. I think..." She trails off, shaking her head.

"You think what?"

Ginny grimaces. "I mean, watching his friends... It was the gunshot. When Moritz kills himself. That was what made them freak out. And... There was a rumor. One of the clarinet players said a kid from Welton ended up in the hospital."

Realization dawns on Chris' face. "You don't think-"

"I don't know," Ginny says. "But... I'm worried. I just wish I knew how to help him. I KNOW something's wrong."

"Why don't you talk to him?"

Ginny looks down. "I don't wanna pry. I mean, it's not my business. I just wish I knew how to help him, you know?"

Chris nods. "Yeah."

"I'm just... I'm just trying to be there, right now. Let him know he can trust me if he ever wants to talk."

"I think that's all you can do."

Ginny looks down. "It doesn't feel like it's enough."

"I know. But that kind of little stuff DOES make a difference. At least, I think so."

Ginny sighs. "Yeah, you're right. I don't want to force it. I'll just let him know I'm here."

"Right."

They fall silent a moment.

"Hey," Chris nudges her shoulder. "I'm excited for tomorrow night. I bet you AND Neil will be great."

Ginny smiles a bit. "You just have to say that because you're my girlfriend."

"Well, that too."

Ginny laughs.

"Oh!" Chris looks down at her phone. "I love this song!"

Chris leans her head on Ginny's shoulder, whispering along to the lyrics. Ginny closes her eyes, just soaking in her girlfriend's voice.

She can feel herself dozing, and she has to fight every bone in her body to keep her eyes closed.

Chris giggles quietly, and Ginny's heart skips a beat at the sound. Chris tucks a strand of Ginny's hair behind her ear and smiles fondly. "Sleep. I'll wake you up when we get back."

"Yeah?"

Chris kisses her forehead. "Yeah."

Ginny hums, allowing her eyes to flutter shut. Chris pulls her closer, continuing to sing quietly.

Ginny sleeps, content.

Chapter End Notes

For a Neil fic I sure do like writing chapters from other character's perspectives,,, but I just can't stop writing these two lmao

Next chapter should be the play!

As always, thank you for reading, and hope you have a lovely day/night ❤

You Can Afford To Lose A Day Or Two

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays! Have some fluff! ...Mostly...

Warnings for: emotional abuse, discussions of suicide, effects of trauma, crying, and referenced physical abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Neil was in the third grade, he ate what must have been nearly three pounds of candy.

It wasn't his fault at all- really. He was just helping Charlie, and Charlie was helping everyone.

I mean, when it's Halloween and your teacher confiscates every student's candy, it's an injustice. So, of course Charlie is going to steal it back when the teacher was on a bathroom break. And of course, the other students are too afraid to take their candy back- they're Welton-bound, and know all-too-well the importance of rules.

So, what's Neil supposed to do? Let his best friend get in trouble? No. That's how he and Charlie end up in the bathroom, trying to eat as much of the evidence as possible before they get caught.

In a few hours, Neil will be terribly sick. But for the moment, the sugar and adrenaline have him feeling an incredible high he's certain he'll never feel again.

Then, he bows to a cheering audience after his first performance of Spring Awakening, and he feels as if he's just eaten all the candy in the world.

The curtain falls, and immediately he's enveloped in a hug that consists of cast and crew. He's squished in between a stagehand and an ensemble member, the sound of the director congratulating them in the background. Then he's being pulled away and wrapped into a hug with just Ginny. "Fuck yeah," She cheers in his ear, and he laughs. "FUCK yeah!"

They stay that way a minute, voices overlapping, until Ginny gently shoves him aside and exclaims, "I need to go see my girlfriend!"

Neil laughs as she runs off, diving for Chris' arms and causing them both to fall to the ground. He turns slightly, half-expecting to see his father's glare staring him down, meek mother by his side. Instead, he sees his family.

Neil takes off towards them, and grabbing Todd by the hands. Todd lets out a rare, loud laugh, twirling Neil around. "You were brilliant," Todd whispers. "Absolutely brilliant."

"Stop hogging him, Anderson!"

Todd shifts slightly, and all of the poets are hugging. Neil beams. "You all liked it, then?"

"Sorry," Knox says cheekily, "I'm saving my review for when James Corden interviews us all."

"Of course! The highschool chums of Broadway's latest star," Pitts adds.

Neil snorts. "You guys are ridiculous."

"We're just so proud of our little guy," Charlie smirks, ruffling Neil's hair.

"That was some show."

They all whip around to see Mr. Keating standing there. Charlie is the first to react, throwing out a quick "Captain!"

Neil straightens up subconsciously. "Captain... I-I didn't know you were coming."

"Well, Mr. Cameron slipped a flyer onto my desk, and I figured I'd come to see."

The boys turn to Cameron, shocked. "Thanks," Neil says softly.

Cameron shrugs, clearly uncomfortable. "Well, obviously you dumbasses weren't going to think of it..."

Neil smiles, shaking his head. "So... What did you think, sir?"

"I thought it was excellent."

Knox throws an arm around Neil's shoulder. "He killed it!"

Keating chuckles. "He did. You truly do have the gift, Neil."

Neil smiles, still staring at Keating uncertainly. Todd frowns a moment, before addressing the group. "Hey, we should go congratulate everyone else. Good theatre etiquette, right?"

"Oh, yeah!"

"We'll be back in a minute!"

They trail off, and Neil looks at Keating, immediately speaking. "I didn't- I'm not sure what they- I don't know what he told you, but I didn't want to drop your class, sir. I- He thought you had something to do with what happened, which- I tried to tell him- but, I just hope I didn't get you in any trouble. I loved your class, you're an amazing teacher-"

"Neil," Keating says gently. "I'm not angry with you."

Neil pauses. "You aren't?"

"Why would I be?"

Neil looks down. "I was foolish. I lied to you, I told you I told my father about the play even though I didn't, and I dropped your class, and I never went to your office to apologize..."

Keating frowns. "I do wish that you had trusted me enough to be honest with me, but I'm not angry."

Neil looks confused. "But- why not?"

"I know how tough of a situation you were in, Neil. I'm happy to give you advice anytime you'd like, but you're under no obligation to follow it. It's your life, Neil. I'm just your teacher."

"But-"

Keating furrows his eyebrows. "Neil... Do you want me to be angry with you?"

Neil only seems to grow more agitated. "No, but you should be! I lied to you, and I avoided you, and I was disrespectful, I- I'm yelling at you right now! Students aren't allowed to tell at teachers! But you- you're just standing there, listening! I..." He slumps. "I don't get it... Why aren't you... Angry with me?"

Keating sighs heavily. "Neil... If you're expecting me to yell at you, or insult you, or degrade you, that won't be happening. I know you've come to expect that from a lot of the adults in your life, but that isn't what a good teacher does."

"But you're not just a teacher!" Neil bursts.

Keating stops.

"You- I've had so many teachers, sir. I've had teachers and staff and tutors, and they've taught me just fine. I've... I've come into their classes, bags under my eyes and hands shaking and silent, and I've gotten A's on their tests, and they haven't cared about me. I'm a good student. Teachers don't need to intervene if you're getting 100's on everything. And I do. Especially in English. I did perfectly in your class, but you kept... Talking to me. To all of us. Checking on us. You... You came to see me act. Twice. And I've been disrespectful, but you're still treating me kindly and I- I don't GET it. I don't... I..." He ducks his head. "I don't think I've ever had an adult give a shit about me before. I don't know what to do... And- and my father- he's known me for 17 YEARS, and you've known me a few months, and you both treat me SO differently. I- I don't know what I'm doing right with you." Neil's shoulders shake, and it takes Keating a moment to hear that he's crying. "And I don't know what I'm doing wrong with him."

"Neil..."

Keating steps closer, and Neil winces as if expecting a strike. Instead, Keating opens his arms, and Neil practically runs into the embrace. Neil sobs, burying his head into Keating's shoulder.

"It's alright, son. It's alright."

After a few moments, Neil calms down, just as the boys return, Chris and Ginny accompanying them.

Todd looks at Neil, concerned. "Everything okay?"

Neil nods, wiping his eyes. "Yeah. All good."

Todd glances at Keating, then nods.

"You all did amazing," Chris gushes quickly.

Ginny grins teasingly. "Except for when Perry almost missed his cue."

It's like a switch has been flipped. Immediately, Neil laughs. "Oh, fuck OFF, Ginny!"

The chatter resumes, everyone talking over each other.

Keating stands back, smiling slightly. "Well, I'd better be off. I've got a bit of a drive home."

He starts to leave, and Neil follows.

"Thank you."

Keating inclines his head. "I was happy to come."

"Not just that." Neil looks up at him. "For... Being here. For all of us."

Keating smiles gently. "Of course, Neil." He climbs into his car, watching as Neil stares at the entrance to the theatre.

"Everything alright, son?"

"Yeah. Just..." Neil gives the softest of smiles, murmuring something that Keating can't quite make out. But then, Neil looks up at him and repeats it. "It... worked."

Keating tilts his head. "What did?"

Neil looks around to see that the poets aren't listening, then turns back to Keating. "I... I didn't want my brain to associate acting with... What happened after Midsummer," Neil says quietly. "I was... I think I was scared... that tonight, you all would come up and congratulate me, and all I'd be able to think of was that night." He pauses a moment, then grins, awestruck. "But... It worked. All I can think about is how happy I feel right now."

Keating nods, a small smile spreading across his face. "I'm very glad to hear that, Neil."

Chapter End Notes

In which I finally manage to write Keating, and shove the found-father-son dynamic down your throats

And with the end of Neil's play, we enter the third and final act of this fic- Hope everyone's excited!

Maybe This Time Is Different

Chapter Notes

> Surprise! I'm not dead! Here's a double-length chapter in apology :)
>
> Warnings for: Lots of discussions of planning for the future, existentialism, referenced emotional abuse, and referenced suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In between school and the musical, Neil spends all his free time doing something he hasn't done in a long, long time: Making a plan for the future.

Now that's he's finally managed to face his father, he can't imagine going back. He's cutting himself off from his father the minute he graduates. Neil's not dealing with him for a second longer than he has to.

Which means he basically has to rethink his entire life.

"If you're still planning on going to college-"

"I am. Just not stupid Harvard."

"Well, then you'll need a way to fund that," Meeks continues. "Obviously there's plenty of scholarships for you to take advantage of, which I think you'll be pretty good with, but you'll have to get a job too. If I were you, I'd find a job as soon as you can, and then get something on campus once you're there. Of course, that's still a few years away, but you should be thinking about it."

It's pretty close to the way his father had always talked about college, and yet it's so different. Neil finds himself genuinely excited as he looks into various opportunities.

"Do you have any aunts or uncles or someone similar that might be willing to help you?"

Neil shakes his head.

Meeks hesitates. "I know it's sensitive, but what about your mother?

"I... I'm not really sure."

It's a good question. A great one, really. Neil hasn't spoken with her since spring break. Since, for the first time he can ever remember, she'd stood up for him.

"That might be pushing it. I mean, my mother doesn't really make much money herself. And I can't imagine her stealing from my father."

Meeks pushes his glasses up his nose, fixing Neil with a look. "Could you have imagined her forcing your dad to pay for your therapy?"

And that's a good point.

Meeks shrugs. "It's up to you, but I'd at least ask her."

Neil nods.

He calls.

The answer is about what he would've expected.

"I'm sorry, baby, I really am. But I just don't think there's anything I could do... If you think getting away from your father is best, I won't stop you, but I don't think I'll be of much use."

"Okay," Neil says. He knew she'd say that. But it's still disappointing.

"Neil, sweetheart... I know it's hard to believe, but your father really does love you. He tries his best to do what's right for you, you know. I think if you just gave him another chance-"

"I love you, Mom, but I'm going to hang up if you finish that sentence."

He can practically hear her mouth click shut.

"I just... Why do you keep defending him? You need to get away from him as much as I do."

"It's more complicated than you think, sweetheart."

"You could come with me," Neil murmurs, protectiveness flaring up in his chest. "You could leave him, and we'd find some place where he'd leave us both alone."

"You're sweet. But I couldn't leave him like that. He's my husband."

"And I'm your son," Neil protests. "Why can't that be important too? Why can't I be important?"

"You are," She insists. "It's just... It's complicated."

It's not. It's very simple. Neither of Neil's parents care enough to look after him properly.

It's not complicated. It never has been.

"Okay," Neil says. "I... I have to go." He doesn't. "There's a teacher telling me to hang up." No one is there. "I'll call you tomorrow." He definitely won't. "I love you." He does.

"Oh." She sounds sad. She always sounds sad. "I'll talk to you later, then. l love you too."

"Yeah. Bye, Mom."

He hangs up.

He can feel his feet carrying him to Charlie's room, but hesitates when he sees only Cameron is there.

He waves, and Neil waves back.

"Charlie's out by the lake," Cameron says, as if he's read Neil's mind.

Neil nods silently.

Cameron hesitates, closing the book he was reading. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just..." Neil thinks of everything he discussed with his mother, and decides he doesn't want to get into it. Still... "You know what you want to do, right?"

Cameron looks confused. "What do you mean?"

Neil walks in, sitting on the windowsill. "I mean, you've got your whole life mapped out."

He nods.

"How do you do it?"

Cameron shrugs. "I don't know. I've always known, I guess. Haven't

you?"

Neil laughs hollowly. "My father's always known, more like."

Cameron nods slowly, staying silent. Neil looks at him a moment before rolling his eyes fondly. "Just say it."

"Say what?"

"Whatever you're thinking. I won't be mad or whatever, even if you say something dumb. But I can tell you want to say something."

Cameron bites his lip. "It's just... Well, surely you had some sort of a backup plan? I know you were planning on doing what your dad wants, but didn't you ever have something in mind? Some secretive Plan B in case you got desperate?"

Neil sighs and looks at him.

"What?"

"Plan B was killing myself, Cameron."

Cameron looks temporarily put out. "Oh. Right."

"Yeah."

Cameron looks down. "Well... Forget plans, then. What do you want to do?"

Neil leans back. "I don't know."

Cameron frowns. "I don't need a detailed list," He explains, "Just the basics. What college do you want to go to? What major? How long? What career are you thinking of after that?"

Neil stares at him. "I don't know, Cameron."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know any of that stuff."

"That's not..." Cameron flounders for a moment, before shaking his head. "Well, you want to act, don't you?"

Neil shrugs.

Cameron looks stunned. "You don't want to act?"

"I didn't say that. I like acting. But I dunno if it's what I want to do for the rest of my life. I don't... I don't want to be trapped doing one thing for the rest of my life." Neil starts to look nervous. "What if I train for years, get to Broadway, earn the role of my dreams, and it's not everything I thought it would be? What if I only like acting because it was my first taste of freedom, and then I go and get myself trapped in something else? What if it's just as bad as being a doctor? Maybe this is a mistake. I'm... I'm trapped no matter what I do. At least as a doctor I'd have a stable income. And I wouldn't have to lose touch with my parents. Fuck, I should call. I should call my father and tell him I've changed my mind-"

"Neil!"

Neil looks at Cameron and freezes at the expression on his face. Cameron looks terrified. He looks how Neil feels.

"Is that really how you feel?"

Neil nods hesitantly.

"No, I... I mean, all the time. You think like that?"

"I- Yeah."

Cameron frowns. "I didn't... I LIKE thinking about that. Thinking about dedicating my life to something. Growing old in the same kind of life. It's comforting to me. Is... Is it not like that for you?"

"No. No, it's-" Neil scoffs. "It's terrifying. Isn't it terrifying to you?"

Cameron shakes his head.

"...Oh."

Cameron frowns. "Neil, do you... Okay... One thing at a time. Do you even WANT to go to college?"

Neil hesitates. "I dunno. That's what you do once you leave high school, isn't it?"

"I mean, it's what I do. It's not what everyone does, though."

"I just... I've never thought about it."

Cameron stares at him like he's grown a third head. "You've never thought about whether or not you want to go to college?"

"I... I never thought I'd live this long." Neil runs a hand through his hair, laughing shakily. "Fuck, I... I thought I'd be dead by now. Figured if I hadn't done myself in, my father would have. I didn't think I'd be planning a life where I do what I want. I... I don't even know where to start."

"We start with Plan C."

Neil looks at him.

"You said your Plan B was... Suicide. And that was it. So, let's write you a Plan C."

"How?"

Cameron smiles a bit. "I'll help you." He opens the desk drawer, pulling out a fresh notebook from a large pile and grabbing a pencil. "No one plans like me. Let's start broad. What's going to make you happy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Picture yourself happy. What do you think of? It can be a place, a job, a look, anything."

"Todd," Neil says immediately, then flushes.

Cameron shrugs and writes it down. "Somewhere with Todd. What else?"

Neil hesitates. "It can be anything?"

"Anything."

"I've always wanted a dog. Or a cat. Or a snake. Just... A pet."

Cameron writes it down.

"And a mullet. I just... My parents NEVER let me grow my hair out, and I always wanted to. Even if it looks bad. I don't care. I just want to know how it would feel."

Cameron nods and writes it.

Slowly, as Neil realizes that Cameron honestly means anything, the answers come quicker and with more certainty.

"I want to live in the city. But not right in the heart of the city. A smaller city, maybe. Where there's lots to do within driving distance, but you still know everyone in your neighborhood."

"I want to settle down. And travel. Like those families that live somewhere all year round, but every summer they go somewhere new."

"I want to act, but I want to try new things too. Like crochet. And painting. And speaking Italian. I want to be that one weird guy that has a million different hobbies."

"I want a small house. Someplace homey. And not one of those sleek, modern ones. I want mine to be painted bright yellow. With plants in every room. And lots of tacky decorations and furniture. And posters on the walls. And- and a whole wall that's just pictures of friends."

"I want to be somewhere close to a coffee shop. Or a cafe. And then, every Sunday morning, I can go in and watch people walk past and read. And like, the baristas know me and my order, and I know them, and we all chat and become friends."

When he's finally exhausted himself, Cameron's filled up pages.

Neil's clearly embarrassed, but Cameron just smirks. "I thought you had no idea what you wanted?"

"None of this is actually useful, Cameron. There's nothing in there saying whether or not I want to go to college."

"Maybe not," Cameron shrugs. "But it's a start."

Neil looks at him carefully. "You really think so? Or are you just saying that so I don't start crying?"

"If you want someone that's going to lie to you, talk to Charlie. I'm 100% serious, I'm afraid." He says it offhandedly, clearly trying to sound mean, but Neil just smiles.

"Thank you, Cameron. Seriously."

After a moment, Cameron smiles back. "Sure thing."

He closes the notebook, taking a permanent marker from the corner of

his desk and writing on the cover. When he's done, he hands it to Neil. "We'll talk more Monday. Now, shoo. I'm studying." He says it just gently enough for Neil to tell he's not really bothered.

As he walks out, Neil glances down at the cover.

'Plan C'.

Chapter End Notes

> So... Yeah... It's been a month. Sorry y'all. A lot's been going on in my life as of late, and unfortunately this fic sort of fell towards the bottom of my priorities. But I'm back! I can't promise updates will pick up in frequency quite yet, but I don't plan on making you all wait an entire month again, if that's any consolation.
>
> But yeah! Hope you enjoyed seeing more of our gingers here! Have a great day/night <3

The Papers Say It's Doomsday

Chapter Notes

...I apologize in advance...

Warnings for: emotional abuse, hospitalization, and an instance of sexual innuendo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bad days are bound to happen. Especially when you have quite a few good ones in a row. They sneak up, because that's just the way life is.

Neil isn't thinking about that on the morning of his 17th birthday. What's coming will come, and what's coming can wait a little longer. After all, it's his birthday. He's lived longer than he thought he would, and despite it all, as he looks back on his year, he has to count it as a good one. Which means this next year can only be great.

Sure, it's technically just some date. But it's more than that, for Neil. It's the first page in a new chapter of his life.

Nothing can ruin today.

"You up?"

Neil turns to the other side of his bed. Todd's curled up next to him.

"Morning, birthday boy."

Neil smiles and kisses him. "Morning."

"How's it feel being 17?"

"You tell me."

Todd grins. "Falling in love with someone a year ahead of you... What would your parents think?"

"What can I say? I have a thing for older men."

Todd laughs.

"Pity I have classes."

"Mm, I know, how dare they? They ought to cancel the whole day, just for you."

"Exactly my thinking."

"Come on, now. Sooner we finish class, sooner we can celebrate."

Neil cocks an eyebrow. "You have something in mind?"

"The boys and I might have a little something planned," Todd says slyly.

"Well then," Neil says, sitting up. "Who am I to hold everything up?"

Breakfast is a rather nice affair. Pitts had charmed the kitchen into serving Neil's favorite (powdered waffles) despite them not being on the menu until next month. Charlie led the entire hall in singing Happy Birthday again and again, getting progressively louder until Hager threatened to give the entire school detention. To top it off, a few of the underclassmen pitched in to get Neil a very fancy, very obnoxious-looking, custom enamel pin, depicting a cartoonish Neil head in a party hat, and refuse to leave Neil alone until it's pinned on his jacket with his school-appointed badges.

"Honestly," Cameron rolls his eyes, "If Nolan catches you wearing that, you'll have half those badges revoked- and the titles that go with them."

Knox scoffs. "It's his birthday, Cameron!"

"I'm aware. Are YOU aware that, despite the way everyone is acting, his birthday isn't actually a national holiday?"

Meeks shakes his head. "Nolan may say something, but I doubt anyone else will. Neil is the only student the teachers like more than you."

"Oh, come on," Neil protests. "You and Cameron are both leagues above me, Meeks."

And yet, despite Neil's thinking, Meeks proves to be right. Throughout the day, Neil's pin is complimented by no less than 15 teachers, along with a warm smile and a 'Happy Birthday'- and, in Mr. Keating's case, a leatherbound copy of Shakespeare's sonnets that is "Not a gift, seeing as that's not permitted. Think of it as a hand-me-down I was going to get rid of otherwise." Neil grins, easily able to tell that the book is brand-new. To be perfectly honest, he didn't even think the teachers

would remember the date.

"They'd never act this way towards me," Charlie whines, "Even if it was my birthday."

"That's because Neil acts all humble and flustered," Todd says affectionately. "You're even more of a pompous asshole on your birthday than you are normally."

This only makes Charlie whine more. However, after Neil charms a teacher into forgiving a late Chemistry assignment from Charlie, he cheers right up. ("He was up all night helping me finish my homework, so that I could have tonight open to relax, you know?" "Well, we can't have you swamped with homework on your big day, can we, Mr. Perry? I suppose I can give Mr. Dalton until the weekend, just this once.")

Once classes are finished, Neil starts walking towards the dining hall, only to be dragged up to the dorms.

"I'm flattered you've planned things, honestly, but can't they wait until after dinner?"

"Dinner's part of the plan, dumbass," Knox admonishes.

Neil pauses, thinking about the rules against bringing in food. "Where else could you possibly get food from?"

Everyone in the group turns to Cameron expectedly.

Cameron flushes, looking absolutely scandalized. "These idiots coerced me! I didn't want to use the delivery spot for the teacher's lounge," He defends, "I really didn't, but it was that or watch Dalton get expelled for getting caught with McDonald's! Besides, it's only a couple pizzas- I'm sure we wouldn't get in trouble, we could just say it was for the study club! Clubs are allowed to have food for meetings, right? We can just pass it off as that!"

Neil doubles over laughing.

"Still can't believe he agreed to it," Todd says. "If it were anyone else, he would've refused."

"That's not true!" Cameron scowls. "If it were anyone else, I'd mess it up on purpose so they'd get caught. Besides, can you blame me? Neil's the only one that isn't an asshole to me."

"Not in front of you, anyways," Charlie teases.

Neil shoots him a scolding look, and Charlie apologizes, albeit reluctantly.

Still, once they've reached the dorm and begun eating, everyone's in too good of a mood to dig at each other- even Charlie and Cameron.

"We'd planned to do this in the cave, of course," Meeks explains, "But it was just too cold today."

Neil nods in agreement. "That's okay. This is really nice, guys. Thank you."

Once the pizzas are devoured, Todd opens the closet to reveal a pile of gifts.

Neil's cheeks practically hurt from grinning by the end. His bed is now covered in wrapping paper, as well as a stack of gifts. Among them are a hand-knitted sweater (Pitts), a book of famous monolouges (Meeks), a monogrammed set of pencils (Cameron), a record of Cabaret (Ginny and Chris), a stuffed elephant dressed with a top hat and cane (Knox), and tickets for a local showing of The Crucible (Charlie).

Todd is the last to hand over his gift, a small journal of about 20 poems, which Todd shyly explains are all written about him.

"I know it's not much," Todd admits, though Neil is, of course, ecstatic. "But um... You'll get the rest of your 'gift' tonight," He adds quietly.

At this statement, the poets lose it. Neil kisses Todd, Charlie wheezes in laughter, and Cameron's cheeks turn as red as his hair.

"Seriously though," Neil says, once they've all calmed down. "Thank you guys, all of you."

"It's nothing," Knox dismisses. "You deserve it."

Neil smiles, about to respond, when his phone buzzes.

"Sorry, give me one second!" He steps out, turning to his phone and answering. "Hi, Mom," Neil says happily. Despite still being annoyed with her, he can't help but be happy to see her call. It was the only thing today had been missing.

Of course, it's too good to be true.

"Hello, Neil."

Neil straightens his posture, despite knowing his father can't see him over the phone.

"Hello, Father. Sorry, I- I thought..." He takes a breath. "Is Mother there?"

"She's sleeping, at the moment."

"Oh," Neil says, then, "Maybe you could... Wake her up? Just, since the day's almost over, and today's... Y'know..." He trails off, hoping his father will pick up on the hint.

He either doesn't, or chooses not to comment on it. "Don't be ridiculous. Your mother needs as much rest as she can get, these days. I'm sure she'll call tomorrow."

"Right," Neil says, failing to hide the disappointment in his voice.

"Well," Mr. Perry continues, "I thought I'd better check in. It's been a while since we've spoken."

In fact, Neil realizes, they haven't spoken since the blowup over Spring Break. He hadn't noticed just how much he'd been enjoying the peace and quiet. Trust his father to break it, and on his birthday, of all days.

"How have your studies been going?"

"Good," Neil says.

" 'Well', " Mr. Perry corrects.

"Right. They've been going well."

"Are you working on that now? It's about the time you normally do, isn't it?"

"Yes. But- But no, I'm not. Just... Considering the date, you know?"

"The date?"

Neil swallows. "Today's... The 14th. I don't know if you realized..."

"Ah. Of course." There's a moment, during which Neil holds his breath. Then, "Well. I hope you aren't still expecting me to spend our already-limited money on a present for you, after the stunt you pulled."

"A... A present?" Neil splutters. "I was more concerned with some sort of acknowledgement that today's the day I was born, actually! You know, your son? Though, to be perfectly clear, after your reaction to my- to my 'stunt', as you put it, I don't particularly want anything you have to buy me, anyway!"

"This behavior is exactly what I'm talking about. It's always drama with you."

"Drama," Neil bristles, "Is HARDLY how I'd describe my response!"

"Well, regardless. I didn't call to start another argument with you."

"You could've fooled me."

Mr. Perry continues talking as if he hadn't heard. "I just called to check in, and make sure your academics were still in order."

Neil forces himself to calm down, and grits out, "They are."

"Good. Now, if I'm remembering correctly, your exam-"

Neil stops paying attention when he hears a voice on the other end speak. He can't quite make it out, aside from something about 'Room 11'. "Who was that?"

"One of the nurses," Mr. Perry dismisses. "Don't interrupt me, Neil. As I was saying-"

"Nurses?" Neil asks, confused. "Where are you right now?"

"Your mother didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Oh, honestly, she's been calling you for weeks and she didn't even mention it? I'll never understand her habit of avoiding everything of importance-"

"Father," Neil grips the phone tighter. "Where are you right now?"

"Your mother's in the hospital, Neil."

The phone slips out of his hand and drops to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops? Time for the plot to kick in, unfortunately.

But hopefully you guys enjoyed the fluff beforehand! Let me know if you did!

Hold On For Your Life

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for: Hospitalization and illness, implied dissociation, and referenced emotional and physical abuse.
>
> Also, with this chapter, this fic is officially the length of a NaNoWriMo novel. Wow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"But what happened?" Knox asks again.

"I said not right now" Neil insists, trying to push past Knox. The party had halted to a stop when Neil re-entered the room, pale-faced and insisting on leaving. "I'll tell you later, but I have to go NOW."

"Nolan will never let you leave campus this late at night-" Cameron says.

"Well, then I'll break out myself. I have to go."

Todd grabs his hand. "I'm coming with you, then."

"No, you aren't," Neil shakes his head. "Your parents will kill you."

"And your parents won't?"

"My parents are a little preoccupied at the moment, that's the whole point."

"I'm coming," Todd says stubbornly. "I don't want you going alone."

Neil huffs. "I can take care of myself, Todd!"

"No."

Neil freezes and looks at him. "I- What do you mean, no?"

Todd squeezes his hand gently. "No."

Neil looks down.

"We're a team, Neil. I'm coming."

Slowly, he nods. "I... Alright. Let's go, then." He turns to the rest of the guys. "I'll call."

He takes off without another word.

Todd moves to follow, when Charlie steps forward.

"Take care of him, yeah?" His face is full of an emotion Todd can't place.

Todd nods. "Of course."

He has to run a bit to catch up with Neil, who- despite being full of nervous energy- is quieter than Todd's ever seen him.

Well, almost. When he was in the hospital-

He shakes the thought from his head. Now is not the time.

Todd reaches for his hand again, holding on as though Neil might drift away at any moment. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

"My mom's in the hospital," Neil mutters.

"Oh... Did she say-"

"My father wouldn't tell me anything."

Todd nods. "Do you have a plan to get there?"

"There's a rail system in the next town over," Neil rattles off immediately. "It's about a mile walk. It'll be an hour ride until the Morrisville station. Then, a fifteen-minute walk to the hospital."

Todd speaks carefully, "It sounds like you've planned this out before."

Neil doesn't reply, looking so spaced out that Todd's not sure he even heard him.

The rest of the walk is in silence.

Once they're on the train, Todd nudges him gently. "Why don't you try and get some sleep? You've got an hour or so, right?"

Neil shakes his head stubbornly.

"I'm sure you'll want to be alert when we get there, right? You need to

sleep."

"If something happens-" Neil begins. "If they call-"

"Then I'll wake you up and let you know," Todd says simply. "You always take care of me, Neil. Let me take care of you, okay?"

Neil wilts. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," He reassures. "Just get some rest."

Hesitantly, Neil rests his head against Todd's shoulder. If he squeezes Todd's hand a bit tighter than usual, Todd's kind enough to not mention it.

Neil falls asleep within minutes, clearly exhausted. Todd, as promised, stays awake and alert, eyes going back and forth between Neil and the window. There's a fairly nice view, their route lit only by moonlight and the stray lamp post. It would be very peaceful, Todd's sure, if this were any other situation.

Neil starts to stir, frown deepening in his sleep, and Todd just runs his hand through Neil's hair until he settles again.

Todd leans back, and sends out a silent prayer that Neil's mother will be alright. Frankly, he doesn't like her, and thinks Neil is much too forgiving of her, but... Neil's been doing so well. Todd can't help but be worried about how Neil would react if something in his life suddenly went wrong again. He sighs, hoping he's not being too paranoid, though he's sure the rest of the guys are worried about the same thing.

Suddenly remembering the others, Todd pulls out his phone to text them an update.

The responses are about what he expects. Pitts asks him to keep them updated, Cameron says he'll try to take notes for them, and Knox offers a Mi Shebeirach on Neil's mother's behalf. Todd thanks them and promises to text once they're there, then slides his phone back into his pocket.

The ride seems to take hardly any time at all, but it might just be because Todd's deep in thought for most of it. Regardless, eventually they arrive, and Todd gently shakes Neil awake. Neil is clearly still tired, though he seems a little less out of it, to Todd's immense relief.

"You ready?"

Neil nods.

They exit the train, thanking the man who stamps their tickets, and Todd lets Neil lead them from there. He seems to know the way well, and Todd's reminded again of how well Neil planned this all out.

"Neil?"

Neil hums in acknowledgment.

"How'd you know to do all of this?"

Neil turns to him, face grim. "It's a bit of a long story."

"Give me the short version, then."

"Charlie lives around here."

Todd's heart drops. "Oh."

He doesn't know the exact details of Charlie's home life, but he knows it's no better than his or Neil's. He looks up at Neil, silently asking him.

Neil shakes his head apologetically. "It's not my story to tell. I just... I try to be prepared, you know?"

Todd nods, not knowing at all, but he can sense that Neil wants to drop the topic.

As soon as they enter the hospital, they both wince at the long line in front of them. Neil turns to Todd, biting his lip.

"There's no point in both of us waiting. Why don't you go sit, and I'll come get you when I find out the room number?"

Todd frowns. "I can wait with you."

"I slept on the train. You should try and sleep too."

"You're sure?"

Neil smiles a bit, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "I'll be okay. Go sit."

Todd nods slowly. "Okay..."

Neil reaches for his hand, and squeezes it. "Thanks for coming with me," He says quietly.

"Of course." Todd hesitates, then speaks again. "And, hey. I'm sure she'll be fine, yeah?"

"Yeah," Neil says. "I'm sure."

Chapter End Notes

A bit more of a transitional chapter here, but I thought they needed a bit of a quiet moment here.

Also, I wanted to throw in: I've seen the Jewish Knox headcanon around and like it a lot, but I myself am not Jewish, so if what I said in this chapter was inaccurate, please let me know!

In other news, I just finished my ACT, so keep your fingers crossed for me lmao. As always: thank you so so much for reading and commenting, have a great day/night, and see y'all next chapter!

It's No Big Surprise You Turned Out This Way

Chapter Notes

Surprise! Guess who's still alive?

Writer's block really kicked my ass this chapter, and as a result this isn't really my best work, but I just needed to get it out so I can get to the next chapter (which will be better, don't worry). Hopefully you all enjoy the update regardless!

Warnings apply for: hospitals, illness, referenced emotional abuse and suicide, spiraling thoughts, a brief mention of blood, and dissociation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd is woken up by a gentle shaking on his shoulder. It takes a minute for him to look around and remember what's going on, but when he does, he's instantly alert. "Did you hear anything?" Todd asks Neil quickly.

Neil nods, fidgeting with his hands. "They said I could go back. I'm assuming you don't want to-"

"It's up to you," Todd says. "Whatever you need."

Neil thinks a moment, then frowns. "I'd better go by myself. My father probably won't be happy I left school... Will you be alright here? You can head back, if you want to."

Todd shakes his head. "Take your time. I'll be here."

Neil nods, seemingly to himself more than Todd, and leaves.

The walk through the hospital only gives him more time to grow anxious. There's a terrible aura of grief as he makes his way through, though he can't be sure if that's the hospital or if those kinds of thoughts just follow him now. It's not the same ward he had stayed in- it's on a different floor entirely- but he finds the memories of his stay resurfacing regardless.

Is this how everyone felt when they heard the news? When they came to visit him? The all-too-often feeling of guilt absorbs him again, and he can't help but wonder what possessed him to try killing himself in

the first place. What would he have been putting his friends through if it had worked? How would they have reacted?

How is Neil going to react if-

The taste of blood fills his mouth and belatedly he realizes he's been biting his lip. Neil wipes his mouth on the edge of his sleeve, shaking his head as if to shake the thoughts from his head.

He needs to stop catastrophizing. He's just being paranoid. He hasn't even seen her yet. He doesn't even know what happened.

Because his father wouldn't tell him. Which means it can't be good.

Or, it means his father is being an asshole as always.

Get it together, Neil.

Once he gets to the room, he freezes, hand hovering in front of the door.

"You okay, sweetheart?"

Neil jumps, then turns to see a nurse watching him worriedly.

"Oh! Yes, sorry."

She smiles reassuringly and keeps walking.

Neil turns back to face the door, trying to imagine what his therapist would say.

"Holy shit, your mother is in the hospital? And you have to talk to your father again? On top of everything else? Wow, you really can't catch a fucking break, huh?"

...On second thought, that sounded more like something Charlie would say.

Dr. Lauren would probably say something like, "Take a deep breath and remember that while you can't control the actions of your parents, you can control your reactions to them."

Yes. That sounds like her. Now, he just needs to actually do it- though he's pretty sure that's easier said than done.

Whatever. He's stalled long enough. Neil opens the door and walks in.

The next few minutes are a blur. He can't seem to focus on anything, or even care that he can't. He isn't really sure what happens, only that it's accompanied by an increasing feeling of dread.

When he finds Todd in the waiting room, he practically falls into the seat beside him.

"How was it?" Todd asks. He looks up to see Neil's hand shaking. He grabs it, trying to still the tremors.

"I don't know what to do, Todd," Neil says roughly. "Everytime something good happens to me, it just goes bad again. What's the point of that?"

Todd shakes his head. "No, don't talk like that. Come on, let's- let's call Dr. Lauren, okay? You can talk to her, and figure something out, okay?"

"No. No, I have to stop my appointments with her."

"What?"

"We can't afford to take care of my mother- I have to help. I can't keep seeing a therapist, it's too expensive."

"Neil," Todd says carefully, "I really don't think that's a good idea right now."

Neil shakes his head and stands. "Where's my phone? I need to call now."

"Neil-"

He pulls out his phone but immediately drops it. Cursing to himself, he picks it up again, willing his hands to stop shaking.

"Let's go after I call, okay?"

"Are you sure that's-"

"It's fine," Neil says forcefully. "Everything's fine. I just want to pretend things are normal, alright?" With that, he starts walking away, ignoring Todd completely.

Todd puts a hand to his face, attempting to slow his breathing.

He does not have a good feeling about this.

Chapter End Notes

We're at the beginning of the end, folks! There's about 3 chapters left (give or take) so I hope you guys are excited for the end, as well as for some of the other drabbles I've got planned for this universe (as I'm not quite done with it yet)

As always, thank you for reading and commenting, and have a lovely day!

Screaming From My Bedroom Window, Even If It's Gonna Kill Me

Chapter Notes

> Hoo boy. This is the heaviest and darkest this series will ever get. PLEASE take caution with this chapter. A quick summary of the chapter will be provided in the end notes for those who need to skip.
>
> Warnings for: Detailed depictions of suicide, overdosing, spiraling thoughts, self hate, self harm, mentioned throwing up, mentioned hospitals and illness, and alcohol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Please read the beginning author's notes for this chapter <3

Neil's therapist warned him, quite clearly, that even with all these coping mechanisms, bad days are bound to happen. Neil had replied with something along the lines of, "That's shitty". What's the point of everything he's doing if it won't even matter when he needs it? She explains that it matters, it matters quite a bit, because when the bad days happen, he'll (hopefully) have a better grip on the situation.

Well, Neil doesn't have a fucking grip. On anything. And it's a bad day, alright. He's pretty sure 'bad day' is the understatement of the fucking century.

When he and Todd returned to school, Neil swore to himself that everything was going to be fine. But nothing is fine. Absolutely nothing.

All day, he can feel everyone's eyes on him. He knows he looks like shit- he KNOWS- but can you fucking blame him? His friends keep trying to Talk to him, but he doesn't want to Talk. For once in his life, he wants to get through a day without having to Talk to anyone, like a normal fucking human being.

At one point, a freshman comes up to him, asking for help with homework, and Neil snaps at him. Of course, he instantly feels like shit, because really? Who the hell snaps at a freshman? He always prides himself on helping people, and instead, he watches the kid fumble out a "Sorry, I- I didn't mean to bother you-" and run off. Neil

Perry, everyone. Asshole of the year.

Then, he completely bombs his Calculus final. He just knows it. He can't focus on a single problem, all of the numbers blurring together and dancing around in his mind. By the end, he finds himself writing the number 108 for every single answer, hoping that by sheer dumb luck that will be the answer to ONE of the questions. Better a 12% then a 0%, right?

To top it all off, it rains all day. Todd loves the rain. Charlie loves the rain. Neil hates the damn rain. It just makes him feel even more miserable than before.

But what really sets him off is dinner. Because everything else? It's okay. Everything is fine, because today's a Friday, and they always have fries with dinner on Fridays, and fries are Neil's favorite, so if he just makes it through this absolute hellhole of a day, he can eat fries and go to bed and wake up to a day that will be at least slightly better, because he's pretty damn certain it's impossible for a day to be worse than this one.

And so the guys run down to the dining hall, and Knox tries to Talk to him, and Neil once again shuts him down, and they get in line, and guess what? They're out of fucking french fries.

Neil almost cries.

But he doesn't. He nods along with guys friends, fills a tray with disgusting-looking slop, follows them to the table, and sits.

He can't eat a single thing. He feels like throwing up. He feels like screaming. Simply put, he feels like hell. Quietly, he excuses himself from the table.

Charlie gets up with him, because of course he does.

If there's one thing Charlie's learned from years of being Neil Perry's best friend, it's that sometimes, even with all the ways Charlie's learned to comfort him, bad days are bound to happen. Days where it seems like nothing he does makes Neil feel better.

When those days happen, Charlie does the only thing he can: He makes sure that whatever Neil's going through, he isn't alone.

Well, too bad. Neil WANTS to be alone, and before he can stop himself, he's snapping at Charlie to fuck off. And Charlie, hurt and

worried but still kind underneath it all, does.

And as soon as Neil makes it to his empty room, he wonders why the hell he didn't beg Charlie to come with him. Because now, he's alone, and he has know idea how to make himself calm down.

Well.

He knows one way.

The minute the thought enters his head, he tries to push it back out, but by then, it's too late. It's not going away, and the longer Neil sits there hyperventilating, the more tempting it gets.

Oh, fuck it. Who cares? This is how his life is going to go, apparently. Things will go shitty, and then well, and then shitty again. Neil's going to cut right now, and then he's going to promise not to do it again, and then he's going to, because that's just how his world works.

From there, Neil's only left with one problem. He can't find a razor blade.

He KNOWS he has one. No, he doesn't keep a pile lying around anymore, but there has to be one SOMEWHERE. He grabs his toiletry kit, and tears it open, ready to pull away whatever blade is on his razor by hand, but his razor isn't there at all, which causes Neil to remember that he left his fucking razor in the bathroom.

But he can't go to the bathroom, because he's a goddamn mess right now, and there's no way he'll be able to get there without being stopped, so what the fuck is he supposed to do now? He pulls a pair of scissors from his desk drawer, and starts dragging one side back and forth on his arm, but it doesn't do anything more than scratch him. He tries for what must be hours, because that's how it feels, but they don't break the skin. And the sad excuse only makes him crave the feeling more.

Neil can practically feel everything crashing down around him as he pulls his knees to his chest, resisting the urge to rock back and forth. He can't cut, and he NEEDS to, because he doesn't know how to cope without it. He guesses this is the part where he's supposed to call Dr. Lauren, but he can't, because like an idiot, he stopped seeing her, because his mother is in the hospital, and he doesn't know what's happening with her, and he can't find out without talking to his father more, and they're all going to die without ever being a family, and he's SCREWED, goddamnit, he is SO screwed, oh god.

He tries to think of what Dr. Lauren would say if she was here, something about those stupid breathing exercises that Todd hates, but he can't remember. It's in for four, and out for five, and- fuck, it's in for four, hold for five, out for- nine? Fuck. It's in for four, or five, and hold for nine, but how the fuck is someone supposed to hold their breath that long, especially when they're in the middle of a panic attack?

He needs to get one of his friends. He KNOWS he does, but he can't. He can't even move. He can't even think. God, he can't even breathe right now, and he just wants it to fucking stop. He wants to cut, he wants to slice up his arms and legs and his fucking face until he's completely unrecognizable, until he's bleeding out on the floors of Welton because at least then everything would just STOP- but no, he can't, because he knows one of his friends would find him, and he can't put them through that. He can't put them through any of this again, but then, he HAS to, because aren't they going to be so much better off without him? Isn't everything going to be better off without him? But no, he won't traumatize them with the sight of his ugly, broken, bloody body.

But if he goes out quietly...

Fuck, what is he thinking? He's not supposed to kill himself, because... Because... Oh god, he can't remember why he isn't supposed to kill himself anymore. He knows there's a reason, he just KNOWS it, but he can't think of it, can't think at all right now, can't think of anything except the antidepressants in his bag, and Todd's anxiety meds, and the bottle of alcohol Charlie left in here last time they had a party, and he can't think, can't do anything as his body acts of its own accord and chokes the pills down with a swig.

He sits there for a few minutes, soaking in the thought that he's finally going to be free.

And then his phone rings. Some jazzy tune. Charlie's ringtone. Fuck. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuckof fuck ohdguck oh duck of fuvk oh fuckogvfickohfuck

His friends. Charlie and Todd and Knox and Meeks and Pitts and Cameron and Ginny and Chris and fucking Spaz and Hopkins, even. What the fuck is he doing? He doesn't want to die. Fuck. Fuck, he- He doesn't want to die!

Using the panic-filled adrenaline flooding his body, Neil jumps up,

grabs the bottles, and bolts out the door. He isn't even sure of where he's going, only that he needs to get there fast, aware that he's fighting a losing battle against the exhaustion dragging down his thin frame.

Eventually, he finds himself outside Keating's door. Emotion seizes him- of course he came here, even without thinking about it. What adult has been there for him, other than the Captain himself?

He pounds on the door, and Keating is quick to answer.

"Neil? What is it?"

The words come spilling out of his mouth before his mind can form them.

"I messed up, I'm-I'm sorry, I don't know what I- I took these," Neil thrusts the bottles into his hands, "A lot of them, and I don't- Sir, I-I don't want to die," He gasps out.

Keating takes less than a second to process, then dives for a phone and dials 911, speaking as quickly as possible.

All the while, Neil clutches to him desperately, muttering over and over.

"I don't want to die."

Chapter End Notes

> Summary for those who skipped: After a very difficult day, Neil tries to overdose on pills. He quickly regrets this and goes to Keating for help, who calls 911.
>
> I can already feel you guys yelling at me in the comments for this one /lh. All I can say is that sometimes it has to get really bad before it can get better. Next chapter will be much happier, I promise.

When Our Long Night Is Done, There Will Be Light (Epilouge)

Chapter Notes

> Welp, we've made it to the end, folks. I'll save my sappiness for the ending notes. For now, I sincerely hope you all enjoy :)
>
> Warnings for: Aftermath of a suicide attempt, hospitals, medicine, mentioned alcohol, and implied divorce.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Kelly's calling for you, dude."

Neil looks up from his book. August is leaning on the doorframe of their room, eyebrow raised.

"What time is it?"

August enters the room, taking a seat on the bed. "Like 12, I think. That's when they were supposed to come, right?"

"Right," Neil echoes. "Didn't realize it was that time, though."

He shrugs. "Need help carrying anything?"

"Like what, my stringless hoodie and grip socks? I'm good."

August snorts. "Just checking. Catch you later, yeah?"

Neil nods, smiling softly. "Good luck."

"Yeah, yeah, now get going," He waves him off. "There's a hoard of guys looking like they're about to pass out."

Neil laughs, clapping August on the back as he leaves the room. One of the nurses is waiting for him.

"Ready to get going, Neil?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you take your pills this morning?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Alrighty then." She gestures to the entrance. "Your father is just settling the last few things."

Neil opens his mouth to correct her, but thinks better of it. "Thanks."

"Of course." She pulls him into a light hug. "Now, you take care of yourself. I loved having you here, and I never want to see you here again, alright?"

"Will do."

True to her word, Keating is chatting with a nurse when he catches Neil's eye. Immediately, he steps closer, giving Neil a warm smile. "Looking good, son."

"Feeling good, Captain."

The nurse nods in Neil's direction, then returns his attention to Keating. "Now, he's got all of his prescriptions refilled, and appointments made for the next month. After that, you'll have to call and schedule yourselves. It's suggested that you keep an eye on him for the next couple of days, and remember to call if he's still struggling. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?"

"I think we're good. Thank you for everything." Keating shakes the nurses hand, other hand filled with pamphlets Neil can only make out a few words of. With that, Keating turns to Neil. "Ready?"

Neil nods.

"Better get going, then. I believe you have a few people waiting outside for you."

He can feel himself grin. Sure enough, the minute he steps outside, he's greeted by the poets. For a moment, they hesitate, unsure of the next move.

"You can hug me now," He says simply.

With that, he's almost knocked over by the force of all six boys diving at him.

***

Two Months Later...

The cave is chilly, the fire inside only being able to block some of the

wind from getting inside.

The poets are all arranged in a sort of dogpile, everyone lying on top of each other to an extent. Chris and Ginny are there as well, trying to make Chris' coat stretch between all nine of them.

"We can all spend time at my place over the summer," Meeks says. "My moms would be happy to have everyone, as long as you all don't mind looking at my baby photos."

"Mind?" Charlie grins. "I'll take great pleasure in that."

"Haha."

"Ooh! And we can throw a kegger at my place," Ginny says. "My parents are going to meet Chet's new girlfriend, and I weasled my way out of it. We'll have the whole house to ourselves."

"As long as I don't have to interact with your parents, I'm down," Knox says, blushing.

"Aww," Charlie coos, "Is someone embarrassed that he stood outside the Danburry's house reading poetry before realizing Chris wasn't there?"

"Hey," Chris says, "What matters is he learned from his mistakes and doesn't act like a creep anymore."

"Because if he did, I'd kick his ass."

Knox blushes darker. "No one needs to kick my ass! I'm all good now!"

Todd rolls his eyes and looks at Neil. "Didn't your mom say she wants to see us over the summer too?"

Neil nods. "We wouldn't be able to do much of anything, though. Even with her new job, money's still a kind of rough area without my father."

"It seems like she's trying though," Pitts says.

"Yeah. I think she is too. The new house is nice, too. I'm exciting for you guys to see it."

"I'm excited to hang out with you without Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass hanging around," Charlie replies.

Todd smirks. "I just hope Cameron can find time to acknowledge our existence in between his five-hundred college tours."

"I do not have any college tours planned," Cameron retorts, "I know where I'm going! I just have to make a few visits back and forth to get familiarized with the campus, check out books, ask about getting a head start on my classes..."

The group shakes their heads in amusement, and Cameron scoffs.

"You all could afford to schedule a trip or two, you know."

"Why bother?" Charlie asks. "You'll give us all your notes when we see you."

"If you're lucky."

"Besides, half of us know what we're doing."

"I'm actually excited for college," Neil says. "I mean, I know where I'm going isn't the fanciest, but..."

"Their acting program looks killer," Knox says. "You're gonna do great."

"Thanks," Neil says. "God... I can't believe we're going to be seniors next year."

Chris shakes her head. "Crazy, isn't it?"

"That's one word for it," Meeks chuckles.

Pitts looks down. "I'm still pretty nervous, to be honest."

Neil thinks for a moment, then speaks confidently. "We've got this, though."

"How do you know?"

"Dunno," He says easily. "But I know it."

Everyone nods at this, silent a moment. Then, Chris stands. "Are we going to start this meeting or what?"

A chorus of "hell yeah"s rings out.

"I have a poem to read," Neil says boldly.

Charlie nods to him, grinning. "The floor is yours, Perry."

He stands, pulling a slip of paper out of his pocket. "The Orange. By Wendy Cope." No one seems to recognize the names. That makes him smile just a bit wider.

"At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—
The size of it made us all laugh.
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—
They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,
As ordinary things often do
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.
This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.
I did all the jobs on my list
And enjoyed them and had some time over.
I love you. I'm glad I exist."

He finishes, glancing around the cave. They're all smiling at him, clapping and, in Charlie's case, whooping. A light blush tints his cheeks, but he doesn't sit. He just stands there, looking at all of them. Caught in the feeling.

This is the last time they'll meet here for a while. At the cave, or in their dorms, or on campus at all. Welton's held so many of his worst memories, yet so often his best ones, and for the first time, Neil accepts the fact that he has a life beyond high school. This summer, he'll be free.

He makes eye contact with each of his friends. In a year, they'll be leaving, but they'll be moving onto something better. Maybe not perfect, but better. The word makes Neil smile. He's tried, so hard, for years to be perfect. To feel perfect. But feeling the sunlight leaking through the holes in the roof of the cave, their place, their home, he realizes he doesn't mind not feeling great. He doesn't feel awful anymore. And it's beautiful.

Todd stands and places a hand on his shoulder. He looks at him, eyes soft and tender and full of so much love that Neil can't stop himself from kissing his cheek.

Todd smiles at that, brushing Neil's messy bags out of his eyes and cupping his cheek. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Neil smiles gently.

And he is. Maybe not great- not completely- but he's okay.

Neil Perry is okay.

Chapter End Notes

Fffuck I cried so many times while writing this lol.

There we go guys! This has been such a crazy ride and I'm so grateful for all of you for sticking with me through it. Whether you've been here since the beginning of the series or are just joining, thank you from the bottom of my heart. The feedback this series has recieved over these last four years (holy shit I feel old) has been overwhelming in the best way. I'm truly honored to have all of your support.

This story may be over, but Neil's isn't. Neither is his mother's, or Todd's, or Charlie's. Meeks, Pitts, Knox, Cameron, Chris, Ginny, and more all have a lot more to be told. After all, they've still got their senior year open..... I have plenty of one shots planned for this series.

Their stories aren't over yet. And neither are yours. I started this series as a way to cope with my own struggles, and while it's still a battle, things are looking up in a lot of ways. And for those of you who saw Neil in DPS and, like me, saw yourself, I want to say: We have so much beauty and magic in our future. You are loved, you are worthy of happiness, and my inbox is ALWAYS open if you need to talk for ANY reason. I love you all so so much.

Oof. I'm getting sappy here lmao. As always, thank you all so much for reading. Have a wonderful day/night. Take care of yourselves. There will be light. ☘

There Will Be Light: The Playlist

Chapter Notes

Since I've had a few non-Spotify users ask :)

There Will Be Light - The Playlist

Next to Normal - Prelude
Scratch21 - The Rhyme
Natasha, Pierre, and The Great Comet of 1812 - Dust and Ashes
The Fray - How to Save a Life
Aladdin - Proud of Your Boy
Steven Universe - Escapism
Pixies - Where Is My Mind?
Bare: A Pop Opera - Role of A Lifetime
P!nk - Who Knew
Elton John - Rocket Man (I Think It's Going To Be A Long, Long Time)
CHVRCHES - Get Out
Ben Platt - Ease My Mind
The Beatles - Blackbird
Simple Plan - I Don't Wanna Be Sad
Florence + The Machine - Shake It Out
Halestorm - Here's to Us
Natasha, Pierre, and The Great Comet of 1812 - Sonya Alone
Lucy Dacus - I Don't Wanna Be Funny Anymore
Matchbox Twenty - Unwell
Adventure Time - Everything Stays
Spring Awakening - Touch Me
Todrick Hall - Over The Rainbow
Spring Awakening - Totally Fucked
Logic - 1-800-273-8255
Spring Awakening - The Song Of Purple Summer
Next To Normal - I've Been
Sleeping At Last - Saturn
The Beatles - Help!
Diet Cig - Night Terrors
Florence + The Machine - Hunger
Waitress - A Soft Place to Land
Kinky Boots - Soul of a Man
Amanda Palmer - Runs in the Family
Bastille - Pompeii
Stereophonics - Local Boy In The Photograph

AJR - Karma
The Frames - Seven Day Mile
Willow - Dawn
Florence + The Machine - Dog Days Are Over
Billy Joel - Vienna
Bright Eyes - First Day Of My Life
Matt Maltese - As the World Caves In
Pat The Bunny - Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of Your Fist
The Front Bottoms - Twin Size Mattress
Bleachers - I Wanna Get Better
Next To Normal - Light

End Notes

My tumblr is considerablecolors if you'd like to stop by!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!